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THE WANDERINGS OF ASAF

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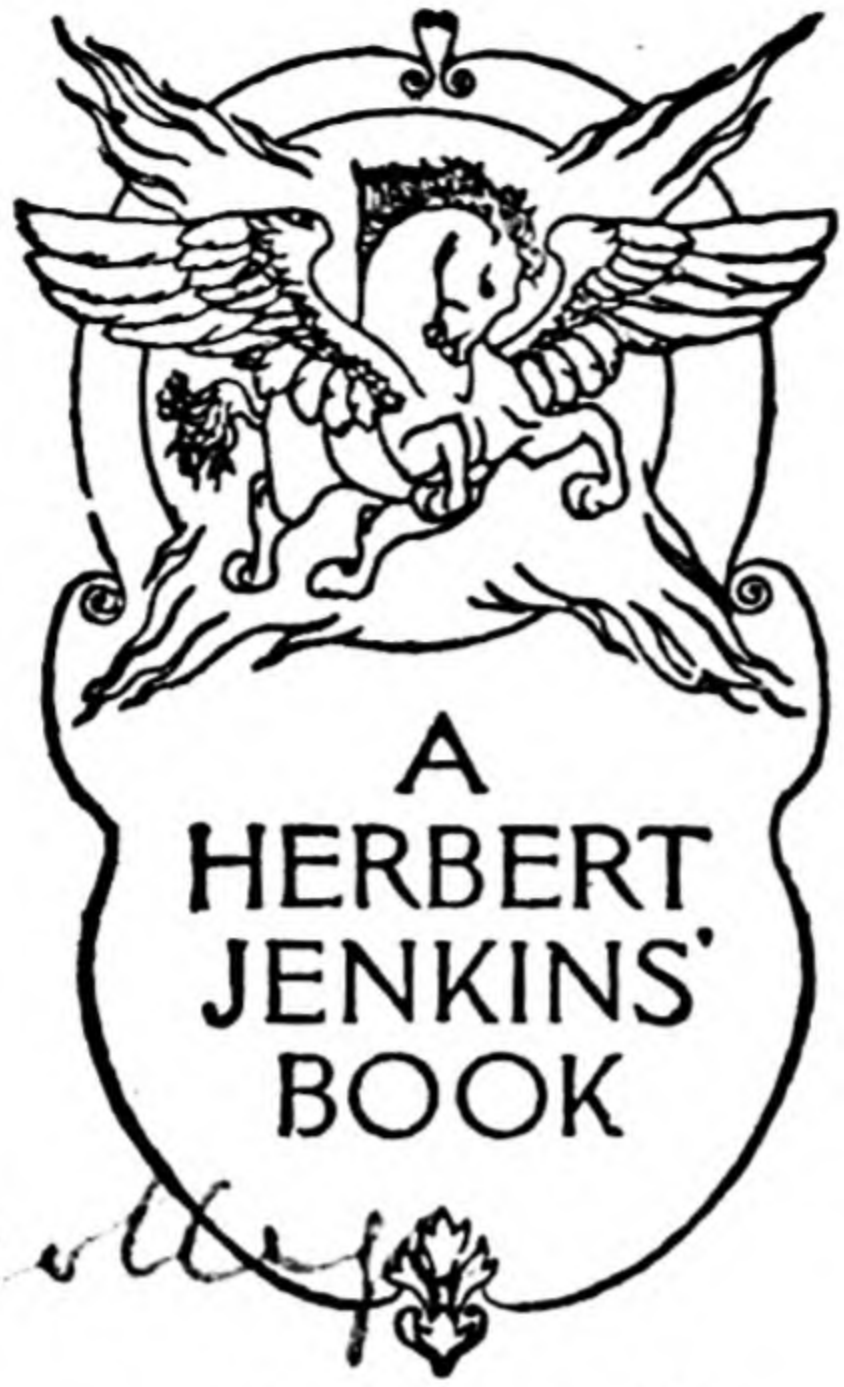

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THE WANDERINGS OF ASAF

CHAPTER I

HE VOWS TO ESCHEW GOOD DEEDS

THE pitiless sun beat down on the rough, stony way in a blaze of heat. The steep sides of the hills through which ran the track—broken, and bare of verdure were these sides—caught the heat and held it so that one walked as in an oven. Each great boulder scattered on the hillside was a furnace, and well did the pass deserve its name, the Gate of Hell.

Narrow was the defile, and steep the sides on either hand, sides boulder-strewn and rough below, rising to giant crags of rock above, great, overhanging crags that sometimes broke and hurled themselves headlong into the pass, blocking it till some wayfarers chanced that way and cleared the track. Lucky they if no more fragments hurtled down the hillside while they worked.

Silence within the pass, save for the chirrup

of the rock cricket, the occasional wail of a hawk wheeling lazily overhead, or the raucous scream of a vulture perched upon the heights. Grey lizards in their thousands basked upon the rocks in the fierce warmth they love, at times moving lazily, at times fixed in rigid immovability, watching with bright, cruel eyes a fly that had settled, and which may or may not approach sufficiently near to make certain that lightning dart which would transfer the unsuspecting insect from the rock to the interior of the hungry reptile.

Grey was the broken track underfoot, grey the rocks on either hand, and grey were the lizards on the rocks. Even the sky overhead had changed its warm blue for the cold grey of steel. No sign of colour, no trees, no grass, naught but a vast immensity of grey—and silence.

But now the silence is broken by the tramp of a horse's hoofs ; and presently at the further end of the pass where it rose from the plain appeared a mounted figure.

The horse, a splendid Yarkandi, that perfection of horseflesh, a cross between the Arab of the sandy plains and the horse of the wild Central Asian steppes, picked its way daintily over the broken ground ; the reins lying idly on its arched neck showing the trust its rider put in the sagacity and surefootedness of his steed. Treading on springs, with never a false step, it made its way surely and smoothly over ground where a man might well have stumbled.

Its rider, lost in thought, gazed before him with unseeing eyes, though his knees, clad in the loose, wide, Pathan trousers, automatically retained the grip that would prevent his pitching over the animal's head should the improbable occur and the horse stumble. His white tunic, caught in at the waist by an embroidered belt, from the upper edge of which protruded the handle of a knife and the butt of a revolver, hung in graceful folds to his thigh. From the belt depended two straps supporting a frog through which was thrust the scabbard of an immense, curved sword. Over his tunic he wore a long, loose, open coat of green velvet, and rolled and put behind him on the crupper of the saddle on account of the heat was a posteen, or sheepskin coat, the hair inside and the outside a mass of cunning silk embroidery. His turban of dark blue cloth was carelessly tied, and the end he had thrown across his mouth to keep the dust from his already parched throat.

For he had been travelling since morning; and though the country before the pass was not so barren as the pass itself, there was little to choose between them. If there was a trifle of green without in the shape of an occasional thorn tree or a clump of coarse grass, there was more dust there than in the pass, dust that rose in blinding clouds with every gust of wind. But here in the pass there was no wind, and the rider presently threw back the cloth that covered his mouth.

A hard mouth it disclosed. A mouth with thin lips that pressed together in a narrow line. A mouth that seemed incapable of a smile. A hard mouth, perhaps a cruel one, and undoubtedly the mouth of a strong man, as strong mentally as physically. And of his physical strength the most cursory glance would convince the observer.

His chest was broad beyond the ordinary, tapering away to a waist that many a woman might have envied for its slenderness and grace of line. Arms long and sinewy, great bunches of muscles on the shoulders, the narrow hips of the born athlete, hands that seemed of steel and whipcord, he was every inch a man. And a proper man he held himself to be if the glance that shot from the keen, grey eyes beneath the strongly marked brows, a glance proud, and cold as the steel of the trusty sword by his side, signified aught. If this were not enough, the arrogant tilt of the prominent chin would convince the most sceptical that here was a man who valued himself at his full worth.

A handsome face and a strong one, its narrow, aquiline nose, its heavy brows, its oval contour, with protruding underjaw that the soft beard of early manhood clothed but failed to hide, proclaimed the possessor a man of the Tribes, a child of the debatable land between Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier of India.

And such in truth he was. From Kai he came, from Kai in the land of the Afridis,

that most warlike of warlike tribes; and his name was Asaf Khan, Asaf Khan, Pathan, Afridi.

Far and wide had he wandered, though yet but in his early manhood, and this place through which he passed was far from his home; for many moons had passed since he bade farewell to his village, urged to depart by his father's wish to marry him when to marriage his heart did not incline. Many adventures had he, both of love and of war, since he left his father's house; and perchance were he now to return his father in his joy at seeing again his son might no longer talk of marriage; but the wanderlust was upon him, forcing him on and ever on.

Suddenly his reverie was broken. His horse stopped, snorting and throwing up its head. It is not well to tarry at such moments; in an instant the man's hand was on his revolver, and his eyes darted like lightning to the spot where that which had alarmed his faithful steed sat crouching beneath an overhanging rock, as if to seek shelter from the pitiless heat.

The man, for man it was, seemed not to be aware of Asaf Khan or his horse, for he made no movement, not even did he raise his eyes. Perchance he slept; though Allah alone knew how he slept in that furnace. The man seemed harmless enough, and dropping his hand from the revolver butt, Asaf Khan patted the neck of his steed, who watched so faithfully over his master's safety, and urged him forward.

"Salaam o aliekaum," Asaf Khan greeted the stranger; but though the man looked up with a surly glance, he made no reply.

He was a burly, thickset man, with rough, harsh features; and as he shifted his position Asaf Khan noticed that his back was not quite straight. He was not hump-backed, but so round shouldered as almost to appear so.

Now, to ignore a greeting is an insult; but thinking that perchance the man had not heard, Asaf Khan again gave him greeting. Still the man replied not. He looked up, and this time he scowled; but he kept his lips closed.

Then was Asaf Khan wroth. Who was this clod who sat by the wayside like a lump of clay, that he answered not the greeting of one of the Faith? Slipping from his horse, he strode up to the man.

"If words will not make thee speak, perchance this will," and he raised his hand in which he held a light switch, carried more for show than for use, for his gallant steed needed no further urging than a shaken rein. The man whipped out a knife, and Asaf Khan stepped back.

So there was something in the clod after all. He would fight, if he would not talk. So much the better. He was a strong, lusty fellow, and would be a worthy opponent, one who would hold his own with many men.

Now, above all things on earth did Asaf Khan love a fight; for thus was his name already

becoming famous on the Border, and he would that it should become more famous till it was in the mouth of every man of those parts. From Buner to the Samana ranges were men beginning to talk of one Asaf Khan; he would that men of other parts should also know his name, and that they should not speak of "one Asaf Khan," but of "Asaf Khan." Therefore was he always willing for the fray, even seeking occasion; and the more worthy his opponent, the more honour would he gain by overcoming him. He drew out his own knife.

"It is good," he said. "Rise, and let us to it, for I would continue my journey."

This time the man spoke. "Would'st fight?" he said, and his voice came harsh and grating from his throat. "I am athirst, and burnt up by the heat of this hell among rocks; give me first to drink, and then it may be I will fight with thee. There shall not be for me much honour in this, for thou art but a short while come to man's estate. Still, if thou wilt, to please thee I will fight."

Asaf Khan's brow grew dark. The fellow gibed at him, terming him hardly more than a youth. But he would soon show this boaster that Asaf Khan was no youth, that Asaf Khan was a tried warrior and a match for the best. He had meant to overcome the man and leave him; now he would slay the wretch.

But for the present he put his anger aside. Thirst is a terrible thing, and the request for water must not be refused. Also the man

would be stronger when he had relieved his thirst, and could not say afterwards that his enemy had taken him at a disadvantage. For thus Asaf Khan reasoned in his earlier days; later, when the years had taught him wisdom, he thought otherwise. He took his water-bottle from behind his saddle and held it out to the man.

The man snatched at it greedily; but to Asaf Khan's surprise, in spite of his thirst, and that he thirsted sore was obvious from the way his voice rasped in his throat, the man drank not. Holding the bottle in his hands, he gazed at the one who had given him this water.

"Ere I drink I would say that I have no pistol," he remarked.

"It is good," replied Asaf Khan. "My pistol I will not use."

The man grunted. But still he did not drink. "We will both fight with the same weapons," he said. "Promise me this. Thou hast a sword, but I have none; and I know not what other weapons lie hidden beneath thy saddle cloth. Promise me that thou shalt fight only with the weapons with which I shall fight, and then will I drink. If thou wilt not promise me this, take back thy water."

"Drink!" said Asaf Khan impatiently. "I promise. I, Asaf Khan, promise to use only the weapons thou usest, and no other."

The man was a fool. How little did he know that the knife was Asaf Khan's favourite weapon! The sword is unwieldy, and when

men are locked in the death struggle it is useless. The pistol kills afar; but ofttimes the ball strikes not that at which it is aimed, or striking, wounds without slaying. The knife! Asaf Khan felt the blade of his great Afghan knife lovingly, passing the ball of his thumb down the keen, razor-like edge. His faithful friend! What honour had been already his by the help of this, his trusty friend! But the man had finished drinking, and now handed back the water-bottle.

Asaf Khan replaced the water-bottle behind his saddle; for all should be done in a seemly manner, and there was plenty of time. Divesting himself of his long coat he threw it upon a rock; his sword he hung from his saddle bow, and drawing his knife, he turned to the man.

"Rise," he said, rolling up the sleeves of his tunic. "Let us to it. Thou hast drunk and art refreshed."

But the man rose not. He sat against a boulder, and near him lay a large piece of rock. With a quick movement he seized the stone and hurled it at Asaf Khan's head. Had Asaf Khan not sprung nimbly aside, that day would have been his last, and he would have died unworthily, his head split asunder by a rock.

With an oath Asaf Khan whipped out his revolver. This dog who fought with stones should be slain. Ever he loved to meet his antagonist on equal terms; but this vile one who hurled stones deserved not to be

treated as man, rather should he be slain for the cur that he was.

But ammunition is hard to be got on the Border, and good powder and shot is too precious to be wasted on a dog. Moreover, and the thought made Asaf Khan drop his hand, he had promised the man to use only the weapons the man used. But the vile son of an abandoned mother used rocks and stones! Must he, the great warrior, cast stones like a boy in a village fight! He skipped nimbly aside to escape another lump of rock that hurtled through the air.

"Cease!" he thundered. "What child's folly is this? Are we children that we should cast stones at each other? Rise, and fight as a man with the weapons of a man!"

The vile one chuckled. "These be the weapons I choose," he jeered. "Nor is this child's play, as thou wilt soon know to thy cost," and he hurled another lump of rock at Asaf Khan's head.

This was intolerable. Asaf Khan barely escaped the missile; and with a growl of rage he raised his revolver again.

"Shoot," taunted the man. "Thou sayest thy name is Asaf Khan; where I go I will tell of the bravery of Asaf Khan and how he keeps his plighted word. We will await thee, O Asaf Khan, and great honour shall be thine!" and he hurled another rock.

Asaf Khan ground his teeth in impotent fury. How should he slay this man. For slay him he would; nor would he leave that

spot while the man lived. So great was his rage, that the blood rushed to his eyes, nearly blinding him, so that he was all but struck by the rock the man flung. He drew off, and glared at the wretch from afar.

For a space there was silence, the man leaning back against the rock under which he sheltered, and Asaf Khan with black rage in his heart glaring from afar at this dog whom, unless he broke his word, he might not slay. For cast stones he would not.

Presently the man spoke; and now he began to revile Asaf Khan and all his ancestors. Pigs were they all, pigs and sons of pigs, and they would perish every one in everlasting fire. Much had Asaf Khan borne from the man, but this was past endurance. Raising his revolver, he pressed the trigger. A grey splash showed on the rock, and the man laughed.

"A bullet wasted!" he jeered. "Why fire at the head? It is a small mark, and may be missed. Fire, rather, at the breast, it is an easier mark," and turning as he sat, he threw open his tunic, again pouring out a torrent of abuse.

Asaf Khan's brows knit in a puzzled frown. There was something at the back of this man's mind. He seemed to seek death; else why sat he thus goading Asaf Khan to madness with the rocks he cast and the abuse he heaped upon him? But why not fight and meet death as a warrior should? He drew nearer the man.

"Have done this childish foolishness!" he said harshly. "Thou hast a knife; rise and fight like a man and a warrior."

The man leant forward and made a snatch at another rock, but Asaf Khan was this time prepared. Like a panther he leaped upon the man, and grasping his wrist, wrenched it round till the stone fell from between his fingers. The man sank back against the rock with a groan, and Asaf Khan gazed down at him in great amazement; in spite of his powerful frame, the man's strength was but that of a child! And now Asaf Khan saw that the man's cheeks were sunk in, and his face drawn as if with much suffering. His eyes fell on the man's foot; it was roughly bandaged, and swollen to the size of two feet. Now he knew why the man would not rise and fight, he could not. But why not have let Asaf Khan pass in peace? Why did he seek death?

"Great shame would'st thou have put upon me this day," Asaf Khan said sternly. "Men would have said that Asaf Khan slew a helpless foe! What had I done to thee that thou should'st seek to put this dishonour upon my name?"

The man lay back with closed eyes, and made no reply; but when Asaf Khan again commanded him to speak, "Go thy way," he muttered. "Leave me. Perchance one more merciful will pass this way and put me out of my pain ere the vultures and jackals devour me living."

"Thou would'st die?" said Asaf Khan thoughtfully. The frame of mind that would cause a man to wish for death was beyond his comprehension in those days, when his heart was high, and the love of life and the joy it brings burned strongly. It seemed impossible; and yet in truth this man had sought by his taunts and abuse to goad Asaf Khan into slaying him. Why? True, the man said he would not that the jackals and vultures should devour him living; but why should they devour him at all? He questioned the man.

At first the man answered not, lying as in a swoon; though from the trembling of his eyelids and the quick heave of his breast Asaf Khan knew that the swoon was but feigned. Presently the man unclosed his eyes and sat up.

"I am one of those who descend upon thy cattle and thy goods, and take what they need by force," he said defiantly, "one of those who molest and rob travellers. I am one of the band that dwells in the hills beyond, living on what they can gain by plunder. Many of thy friends have I slain, perchance some of thy house. Now slay me and begone!"

Asaf Khan nodded his head, and stroked his chin where the beard was yet soft. Knowing that a robber, a murderer, would be shown no mercy, the man wished to goad the one who found him to fury, so that he should be slain at once, lest that one, perchance with the blood of kinsmen to avenge, would kill

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him slowly. But when he saw that Asaf Khan knew him not for the robber that he was, why seek death at his hands?

"I belong not to these parts," he said, "and I have naught against thee. Why not have let me pass in peace? Thou could'st have lain here in comfort till thy friends came for thee."

A grim smile passed over the man's face.

"My friends!" and he laughed shortly. "They were my friends when I had strength and was their leader. Now, he who was my greatest friend is their leader. It came about thus. We had been far afield, for we had word of a caravan that came not this way, but would turn off down another road twelve hours' journey from here. We failed. They were well-armed; and had, moreover, that very day hired a body of men to escort them through the Bad Lands. Three of the band died, and I received a bullet in my foot. My horse also was wounded. We fled, and they pursued. Because my horse was wounded, I was behind the others; and three miles from here the pain in my foot overcame me, so that I swooned, and fell from my horse. I rolled into some bushes by the wayside, and lay there without sense till morning.

"I dared not move by day, and by evening my foot was so swollen that I could not walk; but I made shift to crawl on my hands and knees thus far. That was two days ago. Few pass this way, and thou art the first man I have seen; had there not been a little water

in my water-bottle, I had died. Further I cannot go. None of the band have come to seek me, and here must I die. Rather would I die at once by thy hand than linger till the vultures pick the eyes from my head and the jackals gnaw my bowels while I yet live. Now slay me, and go thy way in peace; Allah will reward thee for thy mercy."

"Thou hadst a home once," said Asaf Khan. "How far is this home?" for it might be that with the help of his steed he could take the poor wretch where he would be tended and healed of his hurt.

A shadow passed across the man's face, and he dropped his head. "My home is far," he muttered. He threw up his head. "My home is naught to thee!" he said fiercely. "Enough that I can return there no more!" For a moment he seemed to struggle with some great emotion. "I slew my brother," he said harshly. "He angered me, and my temper is hasty. I loved him; but I slew him. Have done with thy questions!"

"Thy present home? Where is this robbers' den?"

The man laughed harshly. "It is good. I see what is in thy mind. After thou hast slain me, thou would'st call thy friends and take them to this place. It is good. They sought me not, but left me here to die; slay them, and my thanks shall be thine. Nay, then I shall have no breath to thank thee; take my thanks now. I will tell thee the way."

But Asaf Khan had another thought in his mind. Much had he heard of these robbers, and he would know something of them. Belonging to no one tribe, the outcasts of many, they dwelt in bands in the hills, their hand against all men, and all men's hands against them. He would take this man who was their chief, would restore him to the band, and would dwell with them a space.

"I will not slay thee," he said, "nor will I do aught against the band. I will take thee to thy men. Mount my horse and direct our course. I would dwell with thy band for a space, for I would know what manner of men they be. They will not harm me; they will welcome me, for I shall have restored to them their leader whom they thought to be dead."

For a few moments the man gazed at Asaf Khan in blank astonishment, and then, in spite of the pain he was in, he laughed. Long and loud he laughed, till Asaf Khan grew wroth and bade him cease his untimely mirth.

The man wiped the tears of merriment from his eyes with the end of his turban, and composed his features.

"It is good," he said, and seemed about to laugh again. "It is very good. They will welcome thee because thou wilt restore to them their beloved leader. Fool!" he burst out. "Knowest thou why I was their leader? Because they durst have no other for their leader! More than one has tried to oust me from my place, and they have all died.

They died even when I knew their thought. One there was, one who feigned to be my greatest friend, and he still lives. Often I thought to slay him, but held my hand ; now it is too late. He is their leader, and therefore none come to seek me living or dead. Their beloved leader ! " and he laughed harshly. " They will slay thee, thou fool ! They will slay me—my friend will slay me, for I am helpless—and thee they will slay lest thou go but to return some day with others. Fool! "

Now Asaf Khan suffered no man to call him fool gladly, and he snatched the knife from his belt. But the fierce joy in the man's eyes warned him that death would be not a punishment, but a reward ; and he returned the knife to his belt.

" I will not slay thee," he said positively. " Taunt me, goad me as thou wilt, I will not slay thee. And I say we will go to the haunt of thy band."

For above all things Asaf Khan hated to be told what he must or must not do. At first it was but an idea, an idle thought ; but now, go he would. But with all his stubbornness, Asaf Khan was no fool. If this man spoke the truth, and he had every reason to believe the man's words, to go to the robbers' den would indeed be to put his head between the tiger's jaws. But brave men fear not even a tiger, and oft prevail ; for cunning though the tiger be, man is even more cunning. Allah gave man cunning that he might overcome where strength would avail him naught ;

and for long Asaf Khan stood gazing down the pass, his brow furrowed with thought. At last he turned to the man.

"We will go," he said. "I shall restore to them their beloved leader, and thou canst remove the one who would oust thee. Art sure he is not indeed thy friend?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "What matter? Did I know that in truth the others sought to supplant me? I thought so; it was sufficient. It is not well to tarry in such matters."

Asaf Khan was quite in accord with this sentiment, and merely shrugged his shoulders slightly in turn.

"This we will do," he said. "I shall take thee on my horse, and when we are near thy retreat, don thou my coat of velvet, and muffle thy face in the folds of thy turban. Then shall I approach them, declaring I have brought a prisoner; and when this man who is now their leader approaches, do thou leap from the horse and slay him. Thou wilt then be again their leader, and with thee will I dwell for a space."

That the plan appealed to the man was evident, for his face broke into a wide smile of admiration.

"It is good," he said cordially. "But a short time since, I called thee fool. I take back my words; it is I who am the fool. Of a truth thou art wise and cunning above all men!"

It was no easy task getting the man on

the horse. Though when he was still his foot gave him little pain, the slightest movement caused intense agony; and he was in little short of a swoon when Asaf Khan at last succeeded in getting him mounted.

Before attempting to move the man, Asaf Khan removed the cloth that bound his foot; and at sight of the injured member he pursed up his lips. It was an ugly sight. The foot was terribly swollen and inflamed; and when he saw the blue discoloration round the wound, Asaf Khan hastily threw the cloth over it so that the man should not see. The man was doomed. Of that there could be no doubt. What about their plan when they should reach the robbers' lair?

But Asaf Khan was not one to draw back; and after he had placed the man in the saddle, he took the rein in his hand and led the way. The good horse whinnied, for it was not accustomed to carry burdens while its master walked before; but it followed docilely, and in a quarter of an hour they reached the end of the pass and began to descend to the plain.

The country in view was wide and open; but it was not exactly a plain, for the surface was undulating, with many low hills; and it was towards one of these hills the man directed Asaf Khan to make his way.

The wounded man bore without complaint the jolting unavoidable in such a journey, seeing that the horse had to pick its way round and over boulders; but once or twice he

groaned, though when Asaf Khan asked him if he wished to stop and rest, he refused, impatiently urging the other on. His leg had ceased to pain him, he said, and he wished as soon as possible to get at grips with the friend who had usurped his place, and to resume his position as leader of the band.

Asaf Khan looked graver than his wont. The wound had ceased to give the man pain; the man, then, would live at the outside twelve hours. Their plan of action must be revised—at least his share—he must think what he should do when the leader of the band was no longer alive to protect him.

He said nothing to the man; and they pursued their way in silence till they reached the foot of the hill towards which they had directed their steps. The sun was low in the heavens, and by the time they had climbed the hill to the hollow in which lay the encampment, it would be dusk. So much the better for their plan, the dim light would help; and doffing his coat, Asaf Khan helped the man put it on, the two again going over the plan to make sure nothing was forgotten.

The ascent of the hill must have been agony to the man had not his foot already begun to mortify. As it was, he made no complaint, even urged Asaf Khan to hurry. Should they arrive after nightfall, he said, a bullet instead of a challenge might greet them.

There was no road. A steep path, little more than a goat track, led winding up the hill; but the surefooted steed breasted the

ascent gallantly, and as the sun sank beneath the horizon, they reached the lip of the hollow in which the camp lay. They were not challenged ; and Asaf Khan seized the opportunity to scrutinise the place carefully, noting all the details of his surroundings in his mind. It might be that escape would one day be his part, and he would know the easiest way out ; for the wise man prepares for every eventuality.

Should his need be urgent, by the way they had come he could not leave. By that way he must descend slowly, and would be exposed to fire from above. To urge his horse down that steep declivity would be to invite catastrophe ; hardly could a man on foot speed down that broken, winding path without falling. He looked beyond the hollow. The cliffs rose straight up from the level sward ; no horse could go that way. On either side the bluffs reached the edge ; and it was clear that the only approach to the robbers' lair was by the path up which Asaf Khan had just come.

He drew in his lips. The man he had brought would die in a few hours, of that he was convinced ; it might be that Asaf Khan would be compelled to leave hurriedly, and the thought of hurrying down that steep hillside while the foe fired from above, was not pleasant.

In a shallow valley lay the camp, a valley fair and smiling, clothed with a mantle of tender green gemmed with many a wild flower ; and across it wound a slender thread of silver,

a tiny brooklet that sprang from the foot of the cliff and twined its way through the tender blades of grass and the wild flowers till it sighed softly over the edge and tinkled down the hillside to be lost in cracks and crannies ere it reached the bottom.

But Asaf Khan had no eyes for the beauty of the spot. After a quick look round, his glance fell upon a group of huts lying at the further end of the hollow, huts of undressed stone, loopholed, and guarded by an encompassing wall.

An expression of disdainful scorn crossed his lips as he noticed the absence of all guard. These men were so confident in the terror they inspired in the surrounding country that they neglected the most elementary precautions. And yet better men than they, men far more feared by those around them, had been lost through over-confidence. He started slightly, and a grim smile played about his lips as his sharp eyes discovered the muzzle of a rifle protruding from a bush across the valley. So these men were cleverer than he had thought, far cleverer ; for they had thought of a plan to guard themselves which had deceived for a moment even him. And they were right.

A sentry in the open would be a mark from every point on the hillside, so their sentry was hidden within a bush. Their sentry ? Their sentries, rather ; for now he knew where to look, he saw the ends of three more rifle barrels. He stiffened, and the smile left his face, for at that moment he felt the cold barrel

of a rifle pressed against his spine. Of a truth these men knew their business; and he must rise early who would catch them napping. This man had been hidden but a pace away, yet had he escaped the wary glance of a trained warrior like Asaf Khan.

"Remove thy rifle," he said coolly without turning round. "I bring a prisoner."

"Who art thou?" queried the unseen man behind. "Thou comest, an unknown man, babbling of prisoners; who art thou?"

Time was too precious to waste bandying words with a common man.

"Have done!" said Asaf Khan impatiently. "I would have speech with thy leader. Tell him one has come whom he will be glad to see and welcome into his band. Begone! lest I be angered."

Many a man is accepted at his own valuation even among civilised and enlightened nations; how much more so among those who are ignorant and barbarous! But with this difference. The civilised accept, and are content thenceforth to so value the man. The savage accepts the man, but makes haste to prove him. But for the time the effect is good, and therefore spoke Asaf Khan thus.

There was a grunt, and the man moved round till he stood facing the pair. For a while he stood eyeing them in silence, his gun at his hip, the muzzle pointing at Asaf Khan's breast; but in the end Asaf Khan's glance of arrogant disdain won, and the man turned away his eyes.

"Come," he said curtly, and led the way towards the huts. "In case thou hast not seen," he continued as they moved forward, "know that others have their guns pointed at thee."

"I know," replied Asaf Khan. "There be four. I saw them; thee I did not see. Thou art the first for many a day who has got the better of Asaf Khan."

The man was gratified, as Asaf Khan meant he should be; for thus he would not be too curious about the prisoner, nor call others to help him guard the two to the gate. He stepped out briskly, his shoulders thrown back. This stranger had wisdom. He knew a good man when he met one.

As they approached the narrow gate leading to the enclosure, Asaf Khan increased his pace till he was nearly treading on the man's heels. As the man stopped at the gate, Asaf Khan made as if he would have pushed past, but the man thrust him back. It was not that he grew suspicious. This stranger wished to enter, therefore must he be kept outside. Thus reasoned the man, for in truth he was a fool.

Again had Asaf Khan gained his desire without the man knowing that desire. So narrow was the gate that the horse could not have passed within unless its rider dismounted, and this Asaf Khan knew he was unable to do. What they had to do must be done outside the enclosure; and therefore had he pretended eagerness to enter, knowing well

this fool, for Asaf Khan had taken the man's measure, would deny him admittance if he thought he desired it.

"Stay thou here," quoth the man, in what he meant for a tone of authority. "Stay thou here; nor move, if thou would'st not that one of the watchers should send a bullet through both thee and thy companion."

He disappeared within, closing the gate carefully after him, but they had not long to wait. In a few minutes the gate swung back and a man stepped into the open. He was a big burly ruffian, with a heavy black beard, one side of his face disfigured by a scar running from brow to chin.

"Who art thou?" he demanded in a surly voice. "It will be well for thee if thy message pleases me, or——"

"My message is this," replied Asaf Khan haughtily; for others had now drawn near, and in view of what would follow, he took a high tone. "My message is this. Hearing of thy band, I come to offer myself as a member. I am a warrior, and it may be that some here have heard of Asaf Khan. I come to join ye, and as a pledge of my faith I bring this prisoner whom ye may hold to ransom."

The man gave him a keen, suspicious glance. "It is not enough. How know we that ye come not to betray us? What hast thou done that thou art forced to leave thy kind and foregather with us?"

"That I come not to betray, my prisoner

shows well," replied Asaf Khan; but he offered not to say who that prisoner was, thus exciting the man's curiosity; not only his, but the curiosity of all who had drawn near. They murmured among themselves, though none was so bold as to speak aloud in the presence of their leader, and he heard the murmurs.

"Prisoner!" he said. "Prisoner! Who is this prisoner? I would see his face," and stepping to the side of the horse, he dragged the cloth from the rider's face.

He uttered an exclamation of surprise and alarm; but ere he could draw back, his old chief precipitated himself upon him, and the two fell to the ground, he underneath.

The struggle was short. One was prepared, a weapon in his hand, the other was not. In a moment the knife had done its work, and only one lived. To the amazement of the robbers, for so quick had been his action in throwing himself upon his foe that they had not seen his face when the cloth was snatched aside, their former chief, whom they had thought dead days ago, staggered to his feet.

"Begone!" he commanded harshly. "This friend who tended me and brought me here when ye left me to die, will help me to my house. Go ye to your duties!"

They stared at him for a moment without moving, more in wonder at this strange resurrection than from unwillingness to obey; but when he raised the revolver Asaf Khan had lent him in case the man who had usurped

his place came not near enough for the knife to play its part, they departed in haste.

Barely had the last man left, than the man sank to the ground with a groan. In truth, Asaf Khan marvelled how he had stood so long. It was the indomitable spirit of the man that had alone upheld him, the determination to show no weakness in the presence of his men. Now they were gone, the necessity went with them, and he collapsed in a heap.

"Help me to my hut," he said. "It is in my thoughts that I am spent, for there is no feeling in my leg. I would not that my men should know, lest the next who would be their leader hasten my end and his own advancement."

There were but few huts within the enclosure, twenty at most; and after Asaf Khan had helped the man to one, he returned and brought in his horse which he stabled in a shed that leant against the side of the hut. The man was groaning again; and after he had seen to the comfort of his steed, Asaf Khan went within the hut.

"Why this unseemly noise?" he demanded impatiently. "Is it a warrior's part to whine and weep like an ailing child? What if thy men hear thee!"

The man stifled his groans; but he tossed restlessly from side to side of the bed on which he lay, while Asaf Khan sat beside him wondering what were best he should do.

The man would die, and that shortly; what would become of him, Asaf Khan? He was

sorry he had not followed the thought that was in his mind when the two men struggled on the ground, to leap upon them as if to help, and to drive his knife into the one who lived. No one would have seen, and it would have seemed as though they slew each other. Then, in the confusion he might have escaped. Now it was too late. The watchers would be posted, and escape would be impossible. Presently the man spoke.

"It is not pain of body that will not let me rest, it is torment of mind. I have a son whom I have not seen for six years, and to die without once more beholding his face is bitter. But it is fate. Perchance it is my punishment."

He tossed about for a while, but presently lay still; either he slept, or he had fallen into a stupor.

It was now Asaf Khan's turn to grow restless. Never before had he watched by the bedside of one who lay dying, and the empty waiting was maddening to one of his impatient temperament. He strode about the room; but the man on the bed moved, and he seated himself on a low stool lest he disturb the other and the moans begin afresh. Silence was bad enough; but silence was to be preferred to the dismal lamentations of the dying man. But remain still for long Asaf Khan could not, ever he would be doing; and again he paced the sick room, till the man on the bed stirred.

This time the man opened his eyes and cast a hungry look around.

"Methought my son had come," he said, "but it was an idle dream. I must die without seeing again mine only son." He sighed, and closed his eyes.

"Where is thy son?" asked Asaf Khan abruptly. Anything was better than this dreary waiting for death.

"In my village, the village of Akaru; it lies fifteen miles from here, due west," mumbled the man. "Green are the banks of the stream and sweet the song of the birds. I will walk beside the running water, and will bathe me in the stream. Of a truth the sun is hot this day;" and he began to ramble in his talk, thinking he was again a boy in his village. But Asaf Khan roused him. This wild talk was worse than silence; and also he would be doing something to pass the time till daylight.

"What is thy son's name, and what is his age?" he asked when he saw that the man would understand him.

"My son is fourteen years old—alas! he was but a child when I last saw him—and his name is Rahim Khan."

"The name of a man of thy band?"

A faint surprise showed in the man's eyes; but he gave a name, and going without the hut, Asaf Khan called loudly, returning immediately to the bedside lest the man again fall into a stupor.

"Tell the man that I go to bring thee a hakim," he whispered urgently. "Let him not see thy great weakness."

The man roused himself with an effort;

and as the one who had been called entered, he bade him in a strong voice tell the others that his friend Asaf Khan rode forth to bring a doctor.

The man left with his message, and the dying man sank back on the bed.

Asaf Khan was not one to waste time. The man could not live long, it might be that he would not live till morning ; and in five minutes, mounted on his good steed, Asaf Khan was picking his way down the hillside he had ascended that evening.

The moon was shining brightly ; but moonlight is deceptive on a hillside, and Asaf Khan allowed his horse to pick its own way daintily down the slope. Once the bottom was reached he shook the reins, and the gallant steed leapt forward in the long canter that he could keep up if necessary for six hours—longer if he were pressed. The miles melted away, and within the hour the dark mass of the village Asaf Khan sought rose against the sky-line.

But to reach a Border village at night, and to get inside that village, are two things, not one. Asaf Khan was yet a hundred yards from the village when the challenge of the watchman rang out from the tower above the gate, and Asaf Khan drew rein.

" I come in peace," he answered. " I seek speech with one within the village."

" Honest men come by daylight. The gates are shut ; thou canst not enter."

" Are we owls that we should hoot thus to each other at a distance ? " demanded Asaf

Khan impatiently. "I come. If thou thinkest evil, keep thy gun pointed at me," and he rode forward till he stood before the gate beneath the tower. "Now we can talk like men and have not to yell like jackals," he said. "I seek one Rahim Khan, a boy of fourteen. I bring a message from his father. Open the gate that I may deliver this message."

The watchman laughed hoarsely. "Of a truth in thine eyes am I a fool! Open the gate to thee! Where is that son of Eblis? Why comes he not himself with this message for his son?"

"He lies wounded," said Asaf Khan impatiently. He had not expected the watchman to open the gate, and he made the request merely for form's sake. "If thou wilt not open the gate, call the boy that I may give him this message."

"Give the message in the morning. At this hour all honest folk are abed."

Asaf Khan slipped from his horse and threw a great stone at the gate. "Call the boy, or I rouse the village," and he hurled another stone.

The watchman leant from the small window. He would shoot this audacious stranger. But a stone whizzed up, passing within an inch of his head, and he withdrew hastily.

Another stone crashed against the wooden gate, and now voices could be heard in the village, calling to ask the watchman the meaning of the disturbance. After all, it was little the man wanted, merely to deliver a message;

and he called to say that a stranger had come to deliver a message to Rahim Khan, the robber's son, for thus was the boy known in the village.

Now that the watchman had done his bidding, Asaf Khan ceased his assaults upon the gate, and waited in silence the arrival of the boy.

In a few minutes a head appeared at the watchman's window. "I am here. What is thy message?"

"I bring a message from a brave man to the son of a brave man," said Asaf Khan roughly, "not to a coward who squeaks from a hole!"

The head disappeared, and presently Asaf Khan saw the boy's form black against the moonlight on the wall.

"What is thy message? The gate may not be opened, not even the wicket; it is forbidden. Therefore I may not come to thee."

Asaf Khan laughed. "So also was it forbidden in my village. Nevertheless, in my boyhood when I wished to leave the village and the gate was shut, I left; and the walls of my village were higher than the walls of this village."

"I know thee not."

"And therefore fear."

"I fear thee not."

"Afar."

The boy stamped angrily. The man was a stranger, and every stranger is an enemy

till proved a friend. But the lad was high spirited, and another boy who had accompanied him and now lay on the wall beside him, chuckled. It was enough. Tying his turban to a projection in the wall, the boy let himself down.

"I have come; what is thy message?"

Asaf Khan took a step towards the boy, but the watchman called a warning from above.

"Speak from there. The boy has come; deliver thy message and begone. Advance a step, and I will put a bullet in thy brain."

"So will we," growled a voice from the wall; and looking up, Asaf Khan saw several rifle barrels.

"Ye be suspicious folk," he said with a grim laugh. "I seek the boy no harm. My message, O boy, is this: Thy father lies at the point of death, and his heart yearns for thee. Wilt thou come?"

The boy started forward, but the watchman called a warning.

"What proof? Show that which thou hast brought in proof of thy words. The boy's father can both read and write; show us his written word."

Now that a man of that part could read and write was so unlikely, that Asaf Khan had not thought to ask. Indeed, he had not told the man what was in his mind, lest he find not the boy and the father be disappointed. He bit his lip with vexation. After all his trouble in coming thus far, must he return

alone? But Asaf Khan was not one to be thwarted when he had set his mind upon a thing. He had come for the boy, and with the boy he would return. The lad was well grown and strong, and would be a fair weight; but his willing steed had borne heavier burdens.

He fumbled in his waistcloth. "The man is weak, and wrote but a few words," he said, and stepped with outstretched hand towards the boy, who stood watching him with curious eyes.

With a quick movement Asaf Khan seized the boy by the breast of his tunic and jerked him forward. Before those on the wall realised what was happening below, Asaf Khan leaped upon his horse, again seized the boy whom he had released for an instant, this time by the back of the neck, and hauling him up, threw him across his saddle bow and galloped off.

The whole thing was done so quickly, that before the watchman and the men on the wall had recovered from their amazement, Asaf Khan was a good hundred yards away. And now they feared to fire lest they hit the boy. While they yet hesitated, the horse with its double burden swung round a curve to the left and was lost to sight.

"Allah! What a devil!" quoth the watchman. "He took the boy from our midst even as the mountain leopard snatches the young calf from the byre! Allah grant that he indeed come from the boy's father!"

Some of the men would have unbarred the gate and followed; but the watchman forbade them, threatening the first who should put hand upon bolt. It was the boy's fault for descending from the wall. The gate could not lawfully be opened after dark, unless after due deliberation by the elders; and the law must not be broken for the sake of a headstrong boy.

The boy meantime was fighting like a wild-cat. The breath was knocked out of him for a moment when he was thrown across the pommel; but he soon recovered, and tried to throw himself off. But Asaf Khan held him down firmly, and kick and struggle as he might he could not release himself.

"Devil's son!" and Asaf Khan shook him angrily. "What foolishness is this? Have I not told thee that it is to thy father I take thee! Have done, I say!"

But the boy only struggled the more fiercely. He did not believe this terrible man was taking him to his father. He was being borne to slavery, and he kicked with all his might. The blow landed on Asaf Khan's shin, and with an oath the latter kicked back. Then he laughed grimly. Asaf Khan exchanging kicks with a boy! Surely, never had a warrior fought thus! But the laugh turned into a howl of agony, for the boy had fixed his teeth firmly in Asaf Khan's thigh.

With a yell of mingled pain and fury Asaf Khan hurled the boy to the ground, careless whether he broke his neck or not; and cursing

freely the wolf's cub who had bitten him thus, felt tenderly the injured part.

Though the spot was painful, the skin was not broken; and dismounting, Asaf Khan went back to where the boy lay. He had been slightly stunned by the fall, and was just recovering his senses.

At sight of Asaf Khan he sprang to his feet, but ere he could make off, Asaf Khan seized him.

"Young fool!" he growled. "Hast not sense enough to know when thou art beaten?"

"While I have sense I am not beaten," retorted the other defiantly. "Next time I will take a piece out of thy leg!"

Asaf Khan looked thoughtfully at the boy. Leave him he would not. What had been at first a mere impulse to please a dying man and to pass an idle hour, had, through the difficulties he had encountered, become now a fixed resolve. Take the boy he would; but how?

"Be with me thou shalt!" he said decidedly. "I, Asaf Khan, say it."

"Go I will not," retorted the other. "I, Rahim Khan, say it."

Asaf Khan laughed shortly. He could not but admire the spirit the boy showed. Suddenly he seized the lad and threw him down. Dragging off his turban—the boy had worn a cap which had been lost when he was dragged on to the horse at the gate of the village—he bound the boy's arms to his sides, with the remainder of his turban binding his legs

together. Then he rose to his feet with a grim laugh.

"Now shalt thou go with me," he said. "I, Asaf Khan, say it; let Rahim Khan say what he will. Aye, struggle away," as the boy twisted and rolled on the ground in a frantic endeavour to release himself. "Asaf Khan hath tied thee; thou wilt not soon get loose. Listen, thou wolf cub. Again I tell thee thou hast naught to fear. I in truth bear thee to thy father who lies dying."

Laying the boy across the saddle again he mounted and put the horse to a canter, being careful the boy's face did not approach too near his leg. At last they reached the ascent leading to the robbers' retreat, and here Asaf Khan dismounted. His steed had borne its part gallantly that day, and he would ease it of a portion of its burden up the stiff climb.

For a time it was eased of all its burden; for hardly had Asaf Khan dismounted, than the boy threw himself off on the other side, and Asaf Khan had to put him on again and hold him there.

"Verily, he who sets out to do a good deed stores up for himself a heap of trouble!" said Asaf Khan. "'Tis enough to make a man forswear good deeds for ever!"

When they reached the gate of the enclosure, there was another struggle; for when Asaf Khan lifted the boy off and would have carried him within, strong as he was, it was all he could do to hold the fighting, writhing form.

Stumbling and cursing, he made his way to the hut; and pushing open the door, cast the boy on the floor.

The man on the bed opened his eyes, and looked at Asaf Khan vacantly. Then, following Asaf Khan's glance, his look fell on the boy. In a moment he was galvanised to life. Starting up on one elbow, he stared a moment at the boy; and then, before Asaf Khan guessed his intention, he snatched a knife from beneath his pillow and hurled it across the room.

Asaf Khan ducked. It was well he did so, else had that moment surely been his last; for the knife came point first and would have pierced him to the brain.

"This is strange thanks!" he said angrily. "Art in thy senses, or takest thou me for one of thy band, come to murder thee?"

"I take thee for the fiend thou art!" gasped the man. He had fallen back on the bed after casting the knife, his little strength spent. "I asked thee for death in the pass, but thou would'st not grant it me. Thy words were words of kindness; but thy heart, thou devil! was as black as lowest hell! Thou would'st not that when thy friends come in the dawn, thy friends for whom thou has doubtless left a trail which they can follow, thou would'st not that they should slay me and my band alone, thou would'st make me die a double death by bringing mine innocent son to die with me. What have he or I done

to thee, thou fiend, that he should die for naught!"

"It is enough!" said Asaf Khan. "Never more in my life will I do a kindness to any man! Thy heart hungered for a sight of thy son, and I have brought him to thee. For thanks, I am kicked and bitten, and now am become a devil and a fiend. It is enough! As for my friends, in these parts have I none; nor do I greatly wish for any, seeing what manner of men dwell in these parts. When thou hast spoken with thy son, let him depart. I will wait without and lead him from the camp. He can make his way to his village on foot, the distance is not great. Take him back myself I will not, his teeth are too large and too many!" Uncoiling his turban from the boy's form, he strode angrily from the room.

Asaf Khan brought in his horse and tied it again within the shed; and as he did not wish to disturb the father and son thus strangely brought together, he seated himself a few paces from the door behind an angle of the wall. Outside the enclosure he did not care to venture, for he knew not yet how the men of the band looked upon his presence in the camp. For the same reason he did not care to wander among the huts within the enclosure.

And now he smiled at the thought of what he had just done, of how it had been done, and of what he had suffered in the doing. What he had started as a whim he had carried

through in deadly earnest, he had done a kindness to a dying man, and in return had been cursed and reviled by the man and bitten by the man's son. But he had given the people of that village something to talk about; and the boy on his return would tell them who had defied them. Thus would another exploit of Asaf Khan go forth.

Perhaps he would go that way himself when he left the camp. The boy must depart in an hour or so, and when the man was dead, he too would depart. He stiffened, and his eyes grew alert.

Steps approached, the steps of men who walked with bare feet. Since they walked with bare feet on that rocky ground, it must be that they wished their coming to be secret. Therefore came they with no good intent. Craning his neck, he peered round the corner and saw two figures approaching the door of the hut. Softly he removed the revolver from his belt and waited.

They stopped outside the door, and one whispered to the other; but his companion with a gesture of alarm drew him aside, till they stood not more than two paces from Asaf Khan; though him they saw not, for he had drawn back his head, and now stood pressed against the wall.

"Fool!" whispered the man angrily. "To whisper outside a door! What is it?"

"They be three, our former leader, this stranger, and the hakim whom the stranger has just brought. When making our plans

we forgot the hakim, and now there are but two of us to three of them."

"The hakim!" scoffed the other. "Hast ever heard of a hakim who could fight? Come now. Do thou take our old leader while I take the stranger. Hurry, for the others tarry our signal to tell them that the deed is done. They will wonder at the delay."

They stole back to the door, and paused a moment before it. One felt it, and being unlatched, it gave slightly. The way was clear, and the men straightened themselves for the rush they would make.

But the rush never came. Each man's neck was seized as in a steel vice, and their faces were crashed together with a tremendous impact that blinded them and sent the knives flying from their hands. Again were their faces dashed together; and now they reeled like drunken men. A third time came the terrific crash; and this time, with a muffled groan the two men sank senseless to the ground.

In a moment Asaf Khan had dragged them within the hut and bound their legs and arms with cloth, gagging them by stuffing more cloth into their mouths. The boy was standing by the side of the bed, where he had sprung to his feet when he heard the struggle outside the door; but the man lay still with closed eyes.

Asaf Khan stepped across to the bed and lifted the man's hand. It fell back like a lump of lead, and Asaf Khan placed his hand over the man's heart.

"Thy father is gone," he said. "He is either in Bihist or Dozak (Paradise or Hell): and if we be not out of this village before a jackal has time to call twice, we will follow him."

"Who will bury my father?"

"The jackals. Come."

"I will stay and bury my father."

"Fool!" and seizing the boy by the shoulder Asaf Khan dragged him to the door. "Stay, and the jackals will eat thee as well as thy father!"

"Then shall we have one tomb," and with a quick twist the boy released himself.

"Then must I take thee as I brought thee!" and throwing the boy down again, Asaf Khan snatched the dead man's turban from the bed. But even as he did so he heard a noise outside the door that made him release the boy and spring to his feet, dragging up the boy at the same time. With a quick movement he pushed the boy against the wall beside the door, blew out the lamp, and snatching his pistol from his belt, pointed it at the door.

"Who comes to the door at this time of the night?" he called. "And why come ye secretly, like thieves and murderers?" He smiled grimly as he put this query, for were not these men in truth all thieves and murderers! "The first who opens that door dies!"

There was a whispered consultation without; and Asaf Khan gathered that the men thought

that the first two who had been sent had feared to approach the house. There were at least a dozen men outside, and presently they would burst in. He stepped to the side near the boy.

"Keep thou behind me," he whispered. "If they have knives only, I fear them not though there be twenty; but if they have pistols I can do little. When I fall, fall thou under me; and then try to creep through the door. My horse is without; once on its back, thou art safe."

"Let us go now, both. They are still consulting, and will be thrown into confusion as we burst through the door. Before they can do aught, we will be away."

Asaf Khan shook his head. "Both cannot go. One might, but not both."

"The horse is thine, go thou; I will stay with my dead father. Go now, for the time is short."

"And leave thee here!" Seizing the boy by the shoulder, Asaf Khan shook him angrily till he cried out with pain. "Know, boy," he growled, "that I would kill a man for less than thou hast said! I brought thee into this place of danger; am I a coward that I should now escape, leaving thee here? Do as I bid thee. When I fall, try in the confusion to escape. But first," and stooping, he picked up one of the bound men, "guile will often win where force will not," and holding the senseless figure before him with his left arm, he approached the door.

The men had stopped whispering and were about to try the door, when the door swung back suddenly and a figure stood in the darkness of the opening. In a moment four knives were plunged into its breast ; and as the form sank to the ground, they stooped to finish their work. Three went down under Asaf Khan's knife as they bent over the comrade they had unwittingly slain, and the others leapt back in dismay.

The door closed, and for a few moments the men gazed at it in stupefied silence. But not for long. One had they slain, either their old leader or the stranger, they knew not which, and but one remained. It must be the stranger who still lived, they thought, for the old leader had come to the camp wounded.

"This is a very devil!" exclaimed one with an oath. "But he is alone now, and can do little. Let us rush him together."

But even as he spoke, a second figure stood in the doorway. The fool had delivered himself to death! Again they drove in their knives, little knowing whom they slew, and again as they stooped were three slain.

And then a raging figure of death burst from the door, and seizing the one they had just slain, raised the body on high and hurled it at them. With a panther-like spring Asaf Khan followed the body and slew two. But four were left, and they turned to flee ; but Asaf Khan was upon them. His great Afghan knife rose and fell with deadly precision,

and the last man was slain ere he reached the gate of the enclosure.

Voices could now be heard without, for the men had screamed as they fled from that dreadful figure; but Asaf Khan paid no attention. He guessed all the men had left the huts and gone outside to plan this thing; it would be some little time ere they ventured within to learn the outcome of the business and the meaning of the screams.

Wiping his knife on the clothes of the last man he had slain, for the hilt was wet and clammy, he returned to the hut, making sure with a knife thrust that one or two he passed on the way were indeed dead. Wiping the blade again on the clothes of the first man who had died, he threw the body further from the door and entered the room.

"They have gone," he said. "More will come presently; but they will not bother us much, for they will have seen their comrades without." He lit the lamp, and his eyes fell on a dead man on the floor. "How came this man here?"

"I slew him," replied the boy eagerly. "Thy knife glanced aside, and he was not killed. When thou wert gone, he rose and came in, perchance meaning to slay thee on thy return. I was about to follow thee; but seeing the man rise, I hid behind the door. As he entered, I slew him with my father's knife which I took from my father when he died."

Asaf Khan grunted, but made no reply.

Seizing the dead man by the feet, he dragged him to the door and threw him outside. Footsteps were now approaching, so Asaf Khan again blew out the lamp; and throwing wide the door, crouched low in the opening, his pistol in his hand. If any fired into the room, the bullets would go high.

The footsteps were many; but they approached slowly as if the men who came walked in dread. Asaf Khan waited till their hesitating feet brought them near the door, and then he spoke.

"I am not dead," he said, "though many of thy comrades will not see to-morrow's sun. Begone! Ye left your huts to plan this thing without, so without the enclosure shall ye remain till it is day. Begone, I say, and speedily, else will I haste your going! If any man again enters this enclosure ere dawn breaks, that man shall die! I, Asaf Khan, say it!"

"And I, Rahim Khan, say it!" shrilled a voice at his shoulder. But Asaf Khan swung back his hand, and the boy retired to the further end of the hut, grumbling and rubbing the ear on which the blow had alighted. The figures melted away in the darkness, and Asaf Khan rose to his feet.

He hardly thought the men would molest them further that night, and lighting the lamp, he closed the door.

"Come hither," he commanded, and the boy came sulkily. "Would'st make a mock of me?" asked Asaf Khan grimly. "Aye,

rub thine ear, and thank fate the blow was not harder. It is time for thee to be gone, I shall take thee on my horse to the edge of the hollow on which stands this camp, and from there thou shalt go on foot to thy village. I shall take thee on my horse, for thus shall I return before the men, should they chance to see me, will have thought what to do. Leave thy father in my hands, he shall have fitting burial, I promise thee. It is enough," he said as the boy was about to speak. "This is no child's play. I say thou shalt go, and go thou shalt. Yet shall we give them a few minutes to draw further away, for I doubt if they will spend this night near the huts!" and he laughed harshly.

The boy threw himself on a rug sullenly, and Asaf Khan sat down to think a way out of this hornet's nest he had entered so lightly.

He could not leave by daylight, the men would shoot him as he descended the slope. And he could not leave that night, for he had promised the boy that his father's body should receive seemly burial. He must then leave the following night.

But why leave at all? He was in search of adventure; here was adventure ready to his hand. These men lacked a chief, he would be their chief. True, they were robbers; but they robbed not by stealth; what they took, they took openly and by force, and in this there is no shame. When he tired of the life, he could leave them. Aye. He would remain and be the chief of this robber band. But

it was time the boy left; and he bade him rise and follow.

Leading his horse without the gate, he sprang upon it, and swinging up the boy before him, galloped to the edge of the hollow. Here he put the boy down; and bidding him if he would find his village keep his back to the light that was beginning to show faintly on the horizon, he commended him to Allah's keeping for a brave boy and bade him go.

The boy descended the slope; but his lagging steps told of unwillingness to depart, and Asaf Khan slipped from his horse. As he had half expected, presently the footsteps ceased. Picking up a stone, he hurled it at a venture; and the yell which followed and the volley of abuse the boy poured out told him that the stone had reached its mark, and he chuckled softly. After this the footsteps descended steadily; and knowing the boy would not now turn back, Asaf Khan returned to the enclosure. But at the gate he paused, and called to those without.

"Ye who hear!" he called. "When the sun rises, then come ye to the hut. But come without your guns, or I shoot ye down without mercy, for I also have a gun. I have that to say which may end this unhappy war in which we slay each other for naught."

"We will come," called one or two in reply; and Asaf Khan went to the hut to await the rising of the sun.

The men came punctually. As the sun rose they came, and they stood without the hut

in the small square before the door. None had guns; but all had their knives, and Asaf Khan knew that more than one might have a pistol hidden in his loose garments.

Leaning against the doorpost, he surveyed them in silence for a space, though in spite of his careless attitude his eyes missed not a single movement in the crowd.

"Thy leader is dead," he said presently. "He died last night. What will ye now do for a leader?"

The men looked at one another, and one or two scratched their heads. Their old leader was dead; the one who had taken his place was dead; and one who would have been their leader when they had killed the old one was also dead, slain last night by the man before them.

"I will be your leader," said Asaf Khan coolly. "I am braver than any man here. I am a better fighter—I proved it last night with the knife—and I can shoot straight and quick, as this proves!" There was a report, and a man span round and sunk to the ground, a revolver falling clattering from his hand.

This man had also wished to be leader; but for fear of the man who was dead he had held his peace. Now this stranger would be their leader; what, then, of him? Softly his hand stole beneath his tunic and closed round the butt of a hidden revolver. Softly he withdrew it, unseen as he thought; but that eagle eye had marked the suspicious movement while seeming not to see, and Asaf

Khan was prepared. Now, Asaf Khan could do what few men on the Border can do: he could shoot from the hip and waist with either revolver or gun. As the man withdrew the revolver, before he could raise it Asaf Khan fired, and a bullet crashed into the man's brain.

His companions stared at him open-mouthed, and then turned in wonder to his slayer. The reason they knew, for there lay the revolver that had dropped from the man's nerveless hand; but the method of his slaying excited their wonder, their admiration.

"Shahbash!" (Well done!) exclaimed one; and it was plain from their looks that he voiced the thoughts of the rest. "Never have I seen shooting like unto that! Thou art the man for me! Others may choose whom they will, thou art the leader for me!"

A chorus of approval arose, and Asaf Kahn knew he was now safe. He was the duly elected leader of the band, and as such was safe till another aspired to the position.

Now, it was not for gain that Asaf Khan had joined himself to these robbers; so, to bind them more firmly to him, he told them that he wanted naught of the plunder that was taken. Should his horse be killed, he would take another, and should he lose a weapon it must be replaced; beyond this he wanted nothing, all should be shared by the band. With cries of joy and thanks they crowded round him; and now Asaf Khan knew he was indeed safe for so long as he chose

to dwell amongst them ; for what other would wish to be leader on those terms !

In a short time the dead were cleared away and buried, their late leader among them, and Asaf Khan, after all had bathed and eaten, collected his men on the open space without the enclosure. He would know how many there were in the band, and of what material they were ; that he might use them to the best advantage, giving to each the duty for which he was most fit.

CHAPTER II

ASAF KHAN, THE ROBBER CHIEF

NOW for a time was Asaf Khan chief of a robber band, and well he liked the life. First, that he might know with what he had to do, he counted his men. Twenty and five were they, all young men and strong; and though twenty and five be not a large number, numbers counted not so much as the heart to do and to dare. This they had without a doubt, else had they not been there—some he learnt had been in the band for years.

Of horses they had more than enough; for each of the men who had died in the fight when they sought to slay their old leader and Asaf Khan, left a horse; and of arms there were many, each man having a rifle and a knife, some having also pistols, and a few, revolvers. These latter, the pistols and revolvers, were of little use in such a trade as theirs, where the caravan must be thrown into confusion while yet afar, and the rest done at the point of the knife in a hand to hand encounter. The pistols, moreover, were

muzzle loading, of an ancient pattern, and for the revolvers there was but little ammunition.

No women were there in the camp ; and for this Asaf Khan gave thanks. A lover of woman, he yet knew that where women were, there comes trouble ; and though women are well enough in their way to lighten the tedium of an idle hour, where men's work is to be done they are best afar.

Now, Asaf Khan was a born leader of men ; and though he had not up to this day led men, he had oft dreamt of the day when he should do so, and knew well what it behoved one who would be a successful leader to do.

For the first few days he went not from the camp ; and this time he spent in learning from his men by shrewd questions, which they answered without knowing them to be questions, in what manner they went about their work. He was a warrior, and had often gone with the other men of his village against another village, or against a caravan of merchants ; but though he had heard aforetime much about these robbers, he had himself met none, so knew naught of their methods save by hearsay.

He knew not how they went forth on their raids, what spies they sent out beforehand, what preparations they made, why the villages combined not to drive them from the land ; all of which he must know if he would be a successful leader. But for two reasons he would not that they should know he ques-

tioned them. The men might despise him as a beginner, and his authority would be a mockery, or, for the Border man is prone to suspicion, they might think he sought their secrets to betray them, and they would slay him. Therefore did he question them without seeming to do so.

At last, when he had learnt what he wished to know, three spies were sent forth, and in a few days returned with word of a company of merchants who would venture through the pass. In some way, it may be that the spies spread the rumour, the word went forth in the countryside that in the last raid the leader of the band had been slain; and as naught had been seen or heard of the robbers since that day, men thought that, having no longer a leader, they had dispersed to their homes. Thanks be to Allah! The pass would now be safe till a new band of robbers collected; and the merchants prepared once more to pass that way.

Still, the merchants would travel in a goodly company and be well armed. Robbers who live in the hills are not the only robbers in those parts. Many a village, seeing a weak caravan pass their gates, would not hesitate to send a band of their young men by another way to intercept the caravan.

Halting for the night at a village on the further side, by midday, so Asaf Khan learnt, the caravan would reach the pass; and here the band wished to make their attempt. Hiding behind rocks on the hillside, after firing upon

the caravan with their rifles and so throwing it into confusion, they would rush upon their prey with the knife. Then could a few animals which seemed to bear the richer burdens, such animals as were more carefully guarded than the rest, be cut out and their loads hastily distributed among the band. The robbers would then make in a body to the hither end of the pass, where their horses would be left in charge of two or three men, and throwing their burdens on their horses, they would be up and away or ever the merchants, even if they had the heart, could attempt to regain their lost goods.

But Asaf Khan had in his mind another plan. It was there in the pass that the merchants would expect the robbers to attack, and there they would be doubly on their guard. An attack in the pass would have little hope of substantial success; but once the merchants had left the pass in safety, they would think that the robbers had indeed dispersed to their homes, and in their relief at having passed the danger point in safety, they would grow careless. Then would be the best time for the robbers to deliver their attack.

At first the men murmured. Always was it done thus. To be successful, they must lie in ambush and take the caravan by surprise; and without the pass there were no trees or rocks amongst which they could hide themselves. But Asaf Khan showed them how this also could be done, and the band agreed

that his was the better plan. Moreover, Asaf Khan threatened to put a bullet through the head of any man who said his plan was not good; and so all was prepared as he directed.

Once more the sun shone down with blinding radiance into the pass. The heat was intense, as on the day when Asaf Khan had passed that way; but now the pass was no longer silent, for the tramp of many hoofs, the squeals of ponies, the braying of asses, the gurgling, bubbling moan of the camel, mingling with the curses and shouts of the men who drove them, re-echoed through the pass, driving afar the vulture and the hawk, and scaring the sun-lizards into the cracks and crannies of the rocks.

For a caravan wound its length through the pass, an Eastern caravan, a medley of men on foot, men on horseback, rich merchants, poor travellers, armed retainers, cooks and other servants, camel-drivers, donkey-drivers, even drivers of oxen, for oxen also bear loads in the East; and the noise they made and the dust they raised is only to be heard and seen in the East. Now a camel would blunder into a pony; and the pony with lifted heels and shrill scream of rage would resent the collision. Now an ox would stumble over a boulder in its path and fall to its knees, bringing all behind to a halt till it was again raised to its feet. Again, a mule would kick, and kick, and kick till it succeeded in throwing off its load; and once more the line would halt till the load was readjusted. Men cursed and swore and beat their animals; the travellers

complained of the heat and the dust, their servants bewailing the fate that compelled them to accept service with masters who wandered thus, like homeless gipsies.

At length the caravan reached the end of the pass and debouched into the wider road that led down into the open country beyond. Now did the rich merchants give thanks to Allah for bringing them in safety through the dreaded pass; and even the poorer men gave thanks, for when bullets fly and knives are flashing, who is safe? The drivers of the animals rejoiced also, for many owned the beasts they drove, gaining a livelihood by letting them on hire to caravans; and of what use is a camel or a pony if it be dead, or if its leg be broken by a bullet? And so all rejoiced and gave thanks as they left the pass and came out into the open country beyond.

Alas for men's hopes! Even as they gave thanks for the danger past and hope for a happy future, their hopes were dashed to the ground. Yet such is fate, and what is written must be.

Some who walked that day with the caravan had passed that way before; but it was part of a long road, and they could not expect to remember every stick and stone by the wayside. But one who passed often and knew the road well would have noted a broad, low rock cropping up from the ground by the wayside, a half mile from the pass and a quarter of a mile from the road, and would have wondered how it came there, seeing it was not there when he last passed. Rocks do not

grow out of the ground in a single night, nor could this rock have rolled down from the hills, for it lay far from any slope.

But none in the caravan noticed the rock. The country was open for miles around, no shelter for a concealed foe; and with a light heart they tramped down the road, the animals bubbling, squealing, braying, grunting; the men cursing, shouting, one or two with their voices uplifted in song. And then, in the midst of the rejoicing, when all thought the danger past and themselves safe, like a thunderclap from a cloudless sky the robbers came. From the low rock they came, from the rock that the horsemen of the caravan could see over, and which seemed too low for men to hide behind, much less horses.

But indeed it was no rock, nor did men or horses hide behind it. A great piece of cloth was this seeming rock, a piece made up of many pieces sewn together and plastered with grey clay and wood ashes so that in some parts it was light in colour, and in some parts dark. Making their horses lie down, the band had wrapped cloth about their muzzles so that they should not neigh in response to the noise from the caravan, and throwing the painted cloth over all, had crept beneath among the reclining animals. The cloth, stiff with the clay, sank into sharp points and cracks; and though from close it was a cloth, from the road a quarter of a mile away it was a great rock lying on the plain.

Dire was the confusion, and loud the cries

of dismay when the robbers bore down with terrific speed upon the caravan. No one was prepared. Many had their guns strapped to the sides of their saddles; here could be no danger, and it is easier to carry a rifle thus. Hardly a gun was pointed at the robbers as they came, nor were even those guns fired, lest a robber be slain before the strength of the two bands be tried. Should the robbers prevail, dire vengeance would they visit on the caravan for the men slain.

Nor did the robbers fire, for Asaf Khan would have it thus. These men were not warriors, what glory would be gained by slaying them? Moreover, the noise would throw the animals into confusion, and it would not be an easy task to pick out the ponies with the richer loads. Also, with the animals in some sort of order, the men of the caravan would find it easier to make their way to the other side, as Asaf Khan doubted not they would do; but could they not pass, they might turn in desperation, as even a rat will turn when it cannot escape. With the men on the further side, the robbers could pick and choose with none to say them nay.

This picking out of the richer loads Asaf Khan left to his men; for they were trained to the work, and the booty would be theirs; only he bade them haste, for they were few and the men of the caravan many. The sudden onslaught had affrighted the guards of the caravan; but safe on the other side, protected by the animals between, seeing how

small was the band they might presently pluck up courage and attack in turn.

The men required little urging. They had done this often before, and knew how much depended upon haste. Plunging into the seething mob of animals, their practised eyes ran over the loads. Some of the merchants made prayerful remonstrances; but the robbers laughed, or if the merchant grew too urgent, displayed a knife. In a few moments a dozen ponies were cut out from the rest, halters thrown about their necks, and while some held the ends of the halters and galloped ahead, others galloped in the rear, whipping up the ponies from behind.

Then arose a wail of sorrow from those merchants who had lost their goods, and a howl of rage from the guard who had hidden behind the animals, but who now came forth full of courage to defend their charge from the robbers who were gone. Some fired after the retreating band; but their hands still trembled, and the bullets flew wide. Again they fired; but now the spurts of dust told them that their bullets fell short.

And now were these men filled with the courage of words, the courage of many who sit at home while others do, telling of what they would do if they were only on the spot, yet never going. They would follow these robbers to their den! They would compel them to deliver up the booty they had so audaciously taken! They would hang the leader by the neck to the highest tree they

could find! They would—but the merchants cursed them for cowards and fools, bidding them put the caravan in order and make a fresh start. The goods were gone past recall, it were best to hurry on lest night overtake them ere they reached the next halting place.

With much shouting and urging with whip and goad the animals were again urged forward, and presently all sight of the caravan was lost in the clouds of dust that arose from the plain.

The robber band galloped home at their leisure. Rich was the booty the undoing of the packs disclosed, and great the joy of the band. Never had they made such a rich haul before, and they owed their good fortune to their new leader. All united in his praise. Happy was the day that brought him to their camp, and rightly served were those who sought to slay him at his coming.

Even the brother of one who had died the night Asaf Khan came, and in whose heart up to this time anger had burned against the slayer of his brother, cast all bitterness from him and joined in the chorus of praise. Dear is a brother; but it was in fair fight, and here was much riches; a few more raids like this would make him a rich man for life. Then could he leave the band and settle down in some village where he was not known, buy him a piece of land, build a house and become, who knows, perchance a Khan! After, when he was grown rich with plunder, ere leaving

the band he might spare time to avenge his brother's death by slaying Asaf Khan; but now was not the time, for this man Asaf Khan was a worthy leader, and he would enrich the band greatly with his wit and cunning.

Now was it known to all men that the band still dwelt in those parts. Either their leader still lived, or they had gotten themselves another leader. Men thought the latter, for never before had raid been planned with such cunning. But that the band was there all men knew, and now must the robbers seek further afield for their prey. Caravans would pass that way, for it was a short road; but now they would come strong in numbers, halting at some village beyond till their numbers had grown; and many armed men would they bring with them to guard them through the pass. In or near the pass, therefore, the band could not rob for many days; and five men were sent out to listen on roads further removed, to bring back word of any caravan weak enough to attack.

In the meantime Asaf Khan wanted milk. His food was simple, and always was he a plain eater, for thus is the body kept clean within as without; but milk he drank often, and of milk there was none in the camp, there being neither buffaloes nor cows. But in every village are buffaloes, and in the day they go afield to graze, herded by boys who drive them forth at sunrise and bring them home at sundown. A few men would go and drive some of these buffaloes to the camp—

for now that the men heard of his wish for milk, they also would have milk. There was plenty of grazing for the animals on the hillside behind, and there was water. Asaf Khan took with him three men and set forth; it was not a glorious undertaking, but it would serve to pass an idle hour.

The nearest rich village was Akaru, it was from the herd of this village they would take their cattle; and now Asaf Khan learnt a new thing. No village from which came a man of the band was ever molested; and for this reason: At times, tiring of their life in the wilds, the men would return for a space to their homes; and though it was known in the village that they were men of the robber band, men passed them with unseeing eyes and harmed them not, knowing that while this man lived their village was safe. The late leader was from the village of Akaru, and therefore, though he never visited it, having in his anger slain his brother, the village for his sake was spared; but he was now dead, and the law the robbers had made for themselves no longer held good for this village.

Asaf Khan and his three men reached the grazing ground a couple of hours before sundown. The grazing ground lay three miles from the village, and Asaf Khan chose this time to reach it, for then the boys would have collected the cattle which they would presently drive back to the village, grazing them by the way. Had he gone earlier, the cattle would have been scattered, and it would

not have been an easy task to select the best of the herd. Together, one animal could be judged against another and the best taken.

To have met the herd after it had left the grazing ground would not have been safe; for they left not always at the same hour, and might be near the village where the boys who herded the cattle could raise an alarm. Thus far from the village the boys could do naught. By the time they gave the alarm at the village and the men turned out in pursuit, the robbers would be far, and it would be dark ere the pursuers could overtake them. The men of the village, knowing not how many of the robbers they would meet, would hesitate to follow when darkness fell.

And so Asaf Khan chose his time and came when the herd was collected and grazing on a hillock ere the boys drove them to the village. Asaf Khan called to the boys.

"Choose out for us four she buffaloes, four which are in full milk. Drive these from the herd, and go thy way in peace. Fail not to drive out the best, or thy shoulders shall feel the smart of our whips!" for Asaf Khan would lose no time, and the boys would know without seeking where to find the pick of the herd.

But it was not to be. Filled with fear of those whom they guessed to be robbers, the boys fled with loud cries, leaving the herd to itself. This was not as Asaf Khan had wished or intended; but he had no way to stop the boys unless he fired upon them, and this he

was loth to do. It would only increase their fear and make the boys flee faster, and also the shots might be heard at the village. In a few minutes the herd boys were out of sight.

"We must even choose for ourselves," said Asaf Khan, shrugging his shoulders; and he directed the men to go among the herd and drive out four good she buffaloes, while he stayed to head the animals off should they become frightened and run towards their village. For between the village and the herd had Asaf Khan come; so that if the boys fled, they would flee from the village, and not towards it to carry news of the coming of the robbers.

Asaf Khan directed his men to drive out the buffaloes, thinking to be home with the booty ere nightfall, but it happened otherwise. Even as he spoke, a form leaped on the back of one of the bull buffaloes on the farther side, the figure of a boy; and with a yell he began to urge the buffaloes forward, throwing them into a panic with his cries.

"Yahoo! my sisters! Al-la-la! my brothers! To thy homes! To thy homes, for the wolves be near! The wolves! The wolves!" and he raised his voice on the long howl of a wolf. "To thy homes, my children! To the safety of the village wall!" and again he howled, beating about the face with a stick the animal he bestrode, a great bull, so that the beast, almost frantic with fear and pain, rushed wildly about, increasing the

confusion into which the wolf cries had thrown the herd.

Plunging, snorting, ploughing up the ground till the air was filled with dust, tossing their heads on high, their eyes red and glowing, the buffaloes worked themselves up into a perfect frenzy of fear and rage; so that Asaf Khan, cursing the meddlesome boy fluently and at length, removed farther from the maddened beasts lest one leave the herd suddenly and charge him. Wait till he got hold of this boy; he would beat him, and beat him hard so that he would not in future meddle in the doings of men.

But the boy had not done his worst. Suddenly he changed his cries; and now he mimicked the snapping and snarling of wolves, playing his part so well that even the men could hardly believe the boy made the sounds and that wolves were not indeed worrying the herd.

As for the cattle, it was the last straw. These wolves whose howls they had heard were now amongst them, biting them and ready to leap upon their necks and bear them to the ground. Could they have seen these wolves, they would soon have trodden them to shapeless masses; but though they stared around with their bloodshot eyes, no wolf could they see to vent their fury upon. Nevertheless, the wolves were somewhere in the herd, for they could hear them. Madly they pawed the ground, with upraised nostrils striving to scent the foe. Wildly they rushed hither

and thither, crashing their huge bulks against one another, sometimes, in the extremity of their fear, goring each other.

The dust was now a blinding cloud about the herd; and all Asaf Khan and his men could see was a great volume of circling dust, an occasional, black mass looming through the outer fringe of the enveloping mantle, only to disappear behind the veil the next moment.

Nature could bear no more, and at last what the boy had striven for came to pass. Frantic with terror, the herd stampeded and broke headlong for their village. Straight for the village they made, and straight for the men who waited in the way. On they came like an avalanche, the thunder of their hoofs shaking the ground, their wild snorts and lowings deafening the ear. On they came, a mighty, charging mass that would overwhelm and crush into unrecognisableness anything or anyone so unfortunate as to come in their path.

Then was Asaf Khan like to have perished ingloriously, trodden to a pulp by a herd of village buffaloes. Anger had drowned caution, else might he have looked for this ending; but his anger against this audacious boy was so great that he thought of naught else, and so when the herd stampeded, he was unprepared. Madly he and his men raced for safety. One false step and they were lost. Barely were they clear, than the great herd thundered by in a cloud of dust, a torrent of black forms and flashing eyes of red.

Last of all came the beast bearing the boy. He was still snarling and howling; but as he passed Asaf Khan's party, he ceased his animal cries.

"Not a buffalo shalt thou have, O Asaf Khan!" he jeered. "I, Rahim Khan, say it!" In a moment he was gone, swallowed up in the dust, and Asaf Khan cursed deep and long.

So it was that young devil who had tricked him! Unconsciously his fingers wandered to the fading teeth marks of a bite on his thigh. The boy had tricked him; then let the boy look to himself. Let him once come within Asaf Khan's clutches, and it would go hard with him. The quip at the end angered Asaf Khan even more than the loss of the buffaloes, for often would he say, "I, Asaf Khan, say it!"

But the cattle were gone. It was a useless waste of time to stay there; and Asaf Khan and his three men returned to the band with empty hands, where the tale of their adventure roused the others to unseemly mirth—but not in the presence of Asaf Khan. By this time they knew and feared him too much to even smile when he was nigh.

Next day a party went forth and returned with some milk buffaloes from another village, so that Asaf Khan had his milk; but ever he cursed in his thoughts the boy who had tricked him and made him the jest of his men.

In this way dwelt Asaf Khan three months with the band, doing as they did and leading them on raids against travellers of whom

they got word. Sometimes they returned from these raids laden with booty, sometimes they returned empty, the caravan too strong or too watchful for them to attack; but never returned they with such booty as they got from the first caravan, the one they had plundered near the pass. But the life was not altogether to the liking of Asaf Khan, and presently he began to tire.

Asaf Khan was a fighting man, his soul rejoicing in battle, and in this trade there was little fighting. Either the caravan was too strong, and was allowed to proceed on its way in peace; or, knowing their weakness, when attacked the defenders took refuge on the other side of the caravan or fled from it in fear, standing afar till the robbers departed with what plunder they chose to take. But never was there fighting, and no glory would come to his name while he dwelt in this wise. He would attack and plunder a village.

Now, village will attack village and will plunder it; but robbers leave villages alone, save those who come to plunder on British soil, for these know that little will be done to seek and punish the culprits. But in their own land it is otherwise, and robber bands leave villages alone, contenting themselves with travellers by the way; for in villages be many men, while robber bands are not over large. Taken by surprise, the men of the village might be routed and the village plundered; but when the robbers left, the villagers would return, and would seek revenge. But

while the robbers harmed not the villages, the villages harmed not the robbers.

In that land are no police; and though the villages agreed among themselves that it would be good if these robbers were driven from the land, what is everyone's business is no one's business, and nothing was done. A few cattle now and then was a small matter—men must eat meat, and the band could keep no herd boys—but should the robbers begin to attack the villages, it would be a different matter, and the villagers might bestir themselves. It is good to let sleeping dogs lie, and therefore did the robbers leave the villages alone.

But Asaf Khan was of another mind. What cared he for villages and the revenge the villagers might take! He was tired of the life and wished to leave it; but he would that he might earn a portion of fame ere he left those parts, and this could only be done by attacking some village. Never yet had village been attacked by robber band, and the name of the first man who led his band against a village would be in the mouths of all men.

The band was now one of the largest on the Border, for it was fifty strong. Many of the robbers had sent word secretly to friends of the new leader they had and the rich harvest they gathered, so that day by day came men, young, brave and adventurous, to join the band; and one day Asaf Khan spoke to the men on this matter of raiding a village.

At first the men would have naught to do with this adventure. There was little to gain and much to lose, and they would have every man's hand against them. But Asaf Khan spoke them fair, calling to mind the riches they would gain in one successful raid, riches that would make them wealthy for life and enable them to leave the band and dwell in luxury for the rest of their days far from any village that might seek revenge. His tongue had beguiled both men and women to their undoing, and in the end he prevailed.

Akaru was the village they would attack, for it was the richest in those parts; and though it was large, and the dwellers therein many, surprise would make up for numbers, and Asaf Khan doubted not that the band would return from the foray laden with much plunder. Once persuaded, the men were as eager for the adventure as their leader, and in the evening they would have set out.

But Asaf Khan was not one to rush blindly into any matter, for his guile was a match for his courage; so he reasoned with the men, and on the following day, as behoved a good leader, Asaf Khan went to the village of Akaru to see and study for himself this village against which he would lead his men. Once before had he been to this village, on the night he went to bring a son to his dying father; but it was then night, and he had not entered the village. Since that day he had not been to the village, and none would know him for a robber, much less for the chief of the robbers.

True, the boy might know him, though he himself remembered little of the boy's appearance; but he would go in the day when the boy would be out grazing cattle or scaring birds in the fields.

By now he had forgiven the boy the trick of the buffaloes, though the jest, "I, Rahim Khan, say it!" still rankled in the bottom of his heart; if the boy were in the village and they should meet he would speak the boy fair, and he doubted not that he who had deceived many men would throw dust in the eyes of a boy.

As a traveller went Asaf Khan to the village, and as such he was made very welcome. The village was far from any road, in that land there are no news sheets, and a traveller is always welcome in such places for all men love to hear news from other parts. The news may be old—Asaf Khan had now dwelt three months with the band—but to the people of those far-off places that is news which the world has forgotten was ever news.

And so all men made Asaf Khan welcome; and he walked in the village talking to this man and that, his keen eyes marking the houses of the richer men and studying the village walls and defences. It was a fairly strong village; but every strong place has its one weak point, and he would discover the weak point of this village.

Four watchtowers had the village, and the wall between the towers was high; but in one place, though the wall was high without, within

earth had been thrown against the wall so that men could ascend the slope and cast the village rubbish over the wall, whence it was taken away to the fields. If the outside could be scaled, this would be the place to enter ; for it is not enough to climb a village wall in silence, the descent within must also be in silence lest the watchmen in the towers hear the thud of falling feet.

He glanced at the nearest watchtowers ; the place was midway between. It was good. Had the place been near a tower, any attempt to scale the wall there must have failed, for the watchman would have seen or heard ; but midway between there was more hope of success. True, this part of the wall was under the eyes and ears of two watchmen ; but neither would be close, and in the darkness of the night there would be a chance to rush the wall and be over before either of the watchmen, hearing a noise, could raise an alarm. Once Asaf Khan and his men were within the village, they recked little of the watchman's alarm—the more noise the watchmen made the better, the greater would be the confusion in the village.

At this place, then, would he and his men scale the wall. Without, a few hundred yards away, he could see a clump of thorn trees. To this clump would they take their horses, and leaving them tied, their muzzles bound with cloths, they would creep to the walls. The men were preparing ladders of strong thong with hooks at the end, and a long,

straight pole. One man would climb the pole, draw up the thong ladders and fix them to the wall. Then would the others climb the ladders and drop within. The night would be dark, for the moon would rise late, and Asaf Khan doubted not that he could climb the wall without being seen or heard by the watchmen; for to no other would he entrust this task of taking up the thong ladders, though many begged the honour.

In the late afternoon the traveller bade the villagers farewell. Much they pressed him to stay; but he said his business would not wait, and he must go. But he promised to come and visit their village again; and when they urged him to come soon, for Asaf Khan was a ready talker and had told them many tales of the great world without, more of which tales they would hear, Asaf Khan promised to come very soon, and with an inward chuckle rode off. He would certainly pay the village a second visit, and that right soon; though he doubted if he would receive the same welcome at his second coming as he had at his first, nor would the villagers press for another visit. At sundown he reached the robbers' retreat, and in the evening he led the band forth.

Night fell ere they reached the village, and now they reined in their horses and went more slowly; for the night was moonless, and to increase the darkness a veil of cloud gradually spread across the sky, cutting off even the faint light of the stars. Then were

the men glad. Fate was with them, even nature came to their aid, and they would assuredly return with much spoil.

And indeed nature seemed on their side, for as they neared the village a wind arose that whistled across the fields and through the branches of the few trees. Not only was there darkness to render them invisible to the watchmen, the sighing of the wind would drown the noise of their movements at the wall so that they would be unheard also as they climbed.

The track was rough and broken, and they must go warily if they would not that their horses stumble and fall, so that the hour was late when they drew near the village. But the later the better, for they would not then have so long to wait. The village must by this time be sunk in slumber ; but watchmen slumber not, and it is only in the small hours of the morning that they may perchance nod for an instant. Therefore is that the best time for one to scale a village wall would he enter unperceived by the watchman.

At last the deeper black of the village loomed against the darkness. Asaf Khan was about to turn from the track and lead the way to the clump of bushes behind the village, when a figure ran towards them. It was a boy, and he was wringing his hands and weeping bitterly.

" Now, by Allah, this imp hath come at an unlucky hour ! " quoth Asaf Khan. " We may not drive him from us, for he must belong

to this village and would return babbling of the men he met outside. Nor can we take him with us." And he looked with frowning brows upon the boy. Almost he was minded to slay the lad; but he would not that men should say that Asaf Khan warred with children. "Speak, boy, why weepest thou? And what dost thou without the walls of thy village at night? Knowest not that they will not now admit thee till dawn?" This Asaf Khan said on the chance that the boy might have knowledge of a secret way in and out of the village that the men knew not of.

The boy lifted a tear-stained face; and now Asaf Khan remembered seeing the boy in the village that day. He had seen the boy but for a moment; but he thought then, as he thought now, that he had seen the boy somewhere before, though he could not call to mind where. But it was a matter of small moment.

"My father!" wailed the boy. "They have slain my father! He did no wrong, and yet they have slain him. A man was slain by stealth in the village, and they said my father slew him; though well they know it was the son of Hafiz who did the deed. But Hafiz is a rich man and my father was poor, therefore have they slain my father for what the son of Hafiz had done. But now have they slain him; his body lies yet warm in the village square. My father!"

Asaf Khan's mind was quick to work. Here was a weapon ready to his hand, he would

use it. With the help of this boy he would find a far easier and safer way into the village than over the wall.

Veiling his eagerness, he spoke words of sympathy to the boy, telling him not to mourn overmuch, but to think of the day when he would be old enough to revenge his father's death on his father's murderers; for Asaf Khan would test the boy, of what stuff he was made, and he was not disappointed.

With flashing eyes the boy broke out into a passion of threats against the village and its people. He would set flames to the village and burn it down with all who dwelt therein! Not one should escape his vengeance! Even the children he would burn, for their fathers had done him this wrong!

"It is the right spirit, the spirit of a warrior," and Asaf Khan patted the boy approvingly on the back. "Thou shalt in days to come be a famous warrior, for even as a boy thou hast the warrior spirit. I, Asaf Khan, say it. Always revenge thyself on thine enemies, for so shall all men fear to injure thee; and tarry not for thy revenge, but seek it speedily."

"It is well said!" cried the boy excitedly. "Even now will I go and light the first torch!" But Asaf Khan put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Not so, for many would escape. I shall show thee a better way, so that thy revenge shall be complete. We also seek to be revenged on the men of this village for a wrong they

have done us. Help us, for in revenging our own wrongs we shall revenge thine."

"How?" asked the boy eagerly. "Tell me what thou would'st have me do; and it is done!"

"Canst enter the village unseen?"

"The turban by which I descended yet hangs from the wall."

"It is good. It is very good," and triumph sounded in Asaf Khan's voice. "Go thou back to thy village and climb the wall. Steal thou softly to the gate that the watchman hear thee not, and silently withdraw the bolts. Then suddenly throw up the bar that makes fast the gate. We shall be near, and shall rush inside. Canst do this?"

"It is naught," replied the boy. "The watchman is old, and oft sits between sleeping and waking after his evening meal. He has but now eaten, and will not hear me till it be too late. Come thou to the gate and be ready to enter. O my father! How greatly shalt thou be revenged on those who slew thee!" and he sped off in the darkness towards the village.

Asaf Khan and his men followed more slowly. Dismounting some two hundred paces from the gate, they tethered their horses to a clump of bushes and crept stooping to within twenty paces of the gate. Here they knew they could not be seen, so great was the darkness, but to approach closer was to incur risk and to endanger the success of the undertaking. With every nerve at tension they

waited the opening of the gate, ready to dash in the moment they heard the bar thrown back.

And thus in silence they waited, in a silence so profound that they could almost hear the eager beating of their own hearts. In a moment the boy would be at the gate, and then would be their time.

But the minutes passed, and still the boy came not. Then from the wall they heard a voice; and it was the voice of the boy who should have opened to them the gate.

"O Asaf Khan! I saw thee in the village this day, and therefore went I forth from the village when night fell, thinking that perchance I might meet thee coming this way. Would'st plunder this village while I am here? Go thy way. Not one buffalo shalt thou have, nor one piece of loot from this village! I, Rahim Khan, say it!"

With a mighty oath Asaf Khan raised his rifle and fired in the direction whence the voice came; but the bullet must have gone wide, for they heard no cry, and after he had in his anger fired a second shot into the darkness Asaf Khan turned to his men.

"We are betrayed," he said between his teeth. "We must leave this place; for now that the village is aroused, what hope have we. Even now the villagers may be coming to the walls led by that son of the Devil, and presently they will fire upon us. But on that boy I will be revenged! I know him now, and never shall I forget his false face! I

helped him when his father lay dying, and now he betrays me ! Let him look well to himself, for Asaf Khan is one who never forgives ; and boy or no boy, I will surely one day slay him ! ”

But in this Asaf Khan wronged the boy. Had the boy wished to betray Asaf Khan he could have warned the men of the village and then admitted the robbers. The robbers would have been taken by surprise, and, hemmed in the narrow streets, would have been slain to a man. True, the boy had prevented Asaf Khan's plundering the village, but he had not betrayed Asaf Khan.

But in his rage Asaf Khan recked little of these fine distinctions, and for long he lay awake that night planning how he might get the boy into his power. Twice had this boy held him up to mockery before the band, and for this he should surely die. So great was the rage of Asaf Khan, that for two days he went not forth from his hut, spending the day in solitude, planning how he might revenge himself on this boy. Never had Asaf Khan hated man as he hated this boy ; for though some may think what the boy had done a small matter, Asaf Khan feared death far less than he feared ridicule. Death slays but the body of a man, which is a thing of naught ; ridicule slays the fame.

It would not be easy, for now the boy would not leave the village ; but slay the boy he would, and that soon. All day he thought on his revenge, and far into the night ; so that on the night of the second day it was

towards dawn that he at last slept : and then so wearied was his brain with the thoughts that oppressed him that he slept heavy.

His awakening was rude and sudden. Shots —the cries of men in deadly strife—the clash of weapons ! Dashing from his hut he found a struggling group before the door—more struggling figures on either hand. Cries—shouts —the clash of weapons from every corner of the enclosure. What of the sentries ? Doubtless slain ere the attack was made. Madly he plunged into the group before him. Up and down, up and down went his great knife ; up and down as if worked by some devilish machine, and with every stroke a man went to his death. But ever other foes came trooping to the spot, and ever his men grew less. And now the cries from other parts came fainter and fewer, to presently cease ; and Asaf Khan knew his men were dead ; save for the few who fought beside him, he was alone.

Like one possessed he fought. His knife dripped blood and ran red to the hilt. A word to the few that were left, and they began to fight their way towards the gate of the enclosure. Seeing their object, the foe tried to defeat it, but in vain. Steadily Asaf Khan, and his small band fought their way to the gate, the band every moment growing smaller, till at last but two remained.

Now they reached the gate and burst forth into the open ; but fresh foes were there to receive them, and Asaf Khan's last two comrades fell and died.

Then was Asaf Khan for a time in very truth a madman. With fierce, animal cries he rushed into the thickest of his foes, striking at them with his knife, his bare hands, even kicking at them with his feet ; and such was the fury of his onslaught that they broke and fled in fear from this fiend in human guise.

For a moment Asaf Khan glared round with bloodshot eyes. But one thought was now present in his mind, to get away from this place and to go slay the boy who had sent these men here ; for, by the light of the huts which were now fiercely burning, he recognised some and knew them for men from Akaru. These men had come, and in revenge had destroyed the band that would have plundered their village—and the boy had told them the way. He must get away and slay this boy ere he betrayed others ; and he rushed, hardly knowing what he did, to the place where his horse was stabled.

Saddle and bridle he recked not of. Vaulting on the back of his steed, with hammering heels he drove the frightened animal across the hollow. At the brink the horse refused ; but Asaf Khan pricked it savagely in the flank with his knife, and it took the edge with a bound. Scrambling, slipping, stumbling, it descended in a shower of stones loosened in its descent. From above the men fired, increasing the animal's fear, though none of the shots took effect. The horse neighed shrilly, almost screamed, and the sound of his animal's distress restored Asaf Khan to his right mind.

Soothing the beast with voice and hand he strove to calm it, and in a measure succeeded, so that the horse descended more slowly and carefully and at length reached the foot. Never had a man descended such a place in such wise by daylight, much less in darkness; and for many years was the place shown to strangers and the tale told of how Asaf Khan went down the hill in the dark. Asaf Khan heard the tale once from a man who knew not to whom he was telling it, and his heart glowed with pride that he had done by night what no other dare do by day. Perchance he himself would not have dared had not his need been so great.

They were safely at the bottom; he would now go to Akaru and slay that traitor who had sent the men of the village to destroy one who had befriended him and his. The dawn was at hand. The gate would be open when he arrived; and let the boy hide where he would, even in the heart of the village, Asaf Khan would pluck him forth and slay him.

But he must have a tale to tell at the village; and he must compose himself and arrange his dress, lest those at the gate wonder at one who came so early in such strange guise, and deny him admittance. Also he must account for the absence of both saddle and bridle.

Dismounting near a stream, he bathed his face and bloodstained hands, removing also some bloodstains from his clothes, arranged his disordered dress, and again mounted. He had sprung from his bed and had snatched up

his turban, but had not waited to don coat or posteen. But this was a small matter; he would think of a tale to tell as he rode towards the village. These were simple folk, and a simple tale would satisfy them.

Day had come when he reached the village, and the gate was open. One stood near; and seeing that the man looked at him curiously, but knew him not, Asaf Khan addressed him.

"I am a horse trader," he said. "A boy of this village said that a man, one Hafiz, would buy a horse. The horse must be a quiet one, the boy said, and therefore have I come without saddle or bridle to show how quiet indeed the horse is. Where is this boy? His name, he told me, is Rahim Khan."

"Rahim Khan!" and the man spat on the ground. "He lies there!" and he pointed to what Asaf Khan had taken for a bundle of clothes lying just without the gate.

Asaf Khan's hand clenched on the handle of his knife. Now was the boy indeed delivered into his hand. The boy slept; he would soon sleep deeper than he had ever slept before. The boy slept. Undoubtedly the boy slept, for there was no movement from the clothes, and were the boy awake, he must have heard and recognised the voice of Asaf Khan, the voice of one who could not have come otherwise than as an avenger. This boy had betrayed the man who had befriended his father—and he slept! But he would not slay the boy in his sleep; he would waken him so that he should taste the bitterness of death before he died.

With hand ready to pluck forth the fatal knife he approached the huddled form. But what was this! Blood on the boy's clothes, much blood! And the boy slept not, for his eyes were open. Asaf Khan started back in amaze, for the boy's face twisted into a ghastly semblance of a smile.

"Hast come to slay me?" he whispered. "Do so, and I will thank thee, for thou shalt save me from a worse fate."

Asaf Khan swung round on the man. "Why lies this boy here? Hath he done aught?"

"That he hath," replied the man readily. "Know, O stranger, that a few nights since a band of robbers would have plundered our village, though something, we know not what, frightened them at the last moment. This night have our young men gone forth to attack those robbers in turn. They would have had this boy guide them, for he was taken there once by one of the band to see his father who lay dying, and he knows the way. They spoke him fair, promising him gifts, but the traitor refused. They grew angry and beat him with sticks; still he would not guide them. Then they cut him with the sharp points of their knives so that the blood ran down; but though he screamed, still would he not show them the way. Presently he swooned, so they tied him and left him there. When they return, he shall be laid in the gateway, and the buffaloes shall be driven out to pasture over him. Thus deal we with traitors!"

Asaf Khan glanced round. No one was

near. The watchman, the gate being open and day come, had removed from the window, perchance to eat the morning meal brought by wife or daughter.

"A fitting death for the traitor," he said, and moved closer to the boy.

The bonds were of cloth; one slash of his keen knife, and they would fall asunder. But the man must not give the alarm. The man had followed Asaf Khan, and now stood beside him looking down on the boy. With a backward sweep of his hand Asaf Khan drove his knife into the man's throat. Springing upon the boy, in an instant he severed the bonds and had the boy in his arms. A bound, and he was beside his horse. The next moment he was mounted, the boy before him; and ere the watchman, who, hearing the scuffle below had stepped to the window, could raise an alarm, Asaf Khan was away.

CHAPTER III

THE WIFE OF THE GOLDSMITH

THE evening sun sank slowly behind the hill as Asaf Khan led his horse up an incline, in search of a refuge where he might shelter for the night. The hills were green with grass, and thorn tree had given place to poplar and plane; for Asaf Khan had come far that day, pushing his steed to its utmost strength.

By devious paths had Asaf Khan come, for he dared not keep to the beaten track lest he be overtaken by those who would follow from the village, for they, also, had horses. That some would follow, seeking to recover the boy upon whom they would wreak their vengeance and to slay the last of the robber band, he had no doubt; and burdened with a double load his horse could not travel fast. Therefore had he left the road and travelled by side paths all that day, staying but once, by a stream, to bathe and bind up the boy's wounds.

The cuts were many, but not deep; for the men had meant to torture, not to slay—that would come later, when they returned

after destroying the robber band. Asaf Khan bound crushed leaves upon the wounds; for he was a warrior and had some rough skill in the healing of wounds, as must have all warriors in a land where the only doctor is more often than not the village barber where hakims are few and far between save in the largest villages, and where women may tend only their own men folk.

The boy had lost blood and was weak; but Asaf Khan doubted not that could he find a place to shelter, in a few days the boy would be well and strong once more; for in youth the blood is clean, and wounds heal fast. But first he must find a shelter, a deserted hut on the hillside, a refuge for goat or cowherds when storms swept the mountains —at worst, a cave.

Villages he dare not approach. One who rode in this way, without saddle or bridle, bearing with him a boy in bloodstained garments, would long be remembered; and when word went forth of the slaying of the robber band, folk would know who he was, and remember which way he had gone. To a village he must not take the boy till the lad was healed of his wounds and he had procured a saddle and bridle for his steed. Once the boy was well, the sight of a man taking his young brother to the house of a relation would give rise to no talk.

Till the boy was healed, therefore, they must shelter in some wild spot where he could hide the boy and approach villages alone.

Some place he must find soon where he could lay the boy if only for an hour, while he went forth to procure food. For indeed hunger was even now pressing him sore, though he minded not for himself a matter of such little moment seeing he could fast for three days if need were; but the boy also had eaten naught that day, and to recover his strength he must be fed, and fed well.

Of money Asaf Khan had scant store; but he had that which would bring him more money when the money he had was used. It was the custom of the band to store all plunder in the house of the chief, at intervals dividing it among them and taking or sending it secretly to their homes; and the more precious articles, the jewels and rings, Asaf Khan for further security kept about his own person in a belt which he wore night and day. Thus, when he rushed out of his hut, the belt with its rich contents was round his waist, and for many a day he would not want. But with all his wealth they suffered hunger; and hungry they would be till he could find a place to lay the boy.

He scanned the country about him, so great a change from the barren, sterile country he had just left, though not removed more than fifty miles; for in that land it is a matter of water. The soil is good, and where there is water there is grass, trees, and all green things. In such a fertile spot would surely be a village, a large village, where he could procure food for himself and the boy; but

he could not yet approach a village, and it was not for a village he looked.

What he sought, and what he had sought for the past two hours, was a cave where he could hide the boy till he was well; but search as he would he could find neither hut nor cave, and he was well nigh in despair. Now the night was near, and the cold, and the dew that would be sure to fall, might throw the boy into a fever.

The light faded, and Asaf Khan, giving up all hope of finding a cave, prepared to make a rough shelter of boughs. But he would first seek a hollow; then should a wind arise during the night, as often happens in those parts, they would, in a hollow, be sheltered from the blast. Higher up on the hillside would lie the hollows, and he turned his horse along a path that led upwards.

The boy had spoken little that day. When Asaf Khan washed and bound up his wounds he muttered his thanks, and once he had wished to drink from a stream; but otherwise he spoke not. Neither was Asaf Khan one given much to speech, unless he had an object in that speech, and so the two rode that day in a silence that to many would have appeared strange. Even Asaf Khan was moved to wonder that a boy could be so silent, for boys are much given to chatter; but no doubt the boy felt the smart of his wounds and thus cared not to talk, and he was thankful it was so. But when he turned his horse on the path leading up the hill, the boy spoke.

"Naught hast thou told me of where we go," he said. "Sometimes we have gone up the hill, sometimes down, sometimes along the plain; but ever it did seem to me that thou didst travel without knowing to what place thou would'st go. Hast thou no home?"

"I have a home, but it is far," replied Asaf Khan curtly.

"Then, where go we?"

Asaf Khan shrugged his shoulders and laughed grimly. "It is as Allah wills."

"Why go we not to the robbers' home?"

Asaf Khan laughed again. "That is *my* will."

"We have passed villages," said the boy. "At first these villages were close to Akaru, and it were not safe to tarry; but we passed a village not an hour since, why tarried we not there? Let us go to some village."

"How shall we stay at a village?" demanded Asaf Khan impatiently. "What should we say when men asked about thy bloody clothes and thy wounds?"

"That we were attacked by robbers," replied the boy in a hard voice. "By robbers who, observing the laws neither of God nor of man, would have taken from us the little we had."

Then was Asaf Khan wrath. This wretched boy for whom he had done so much dared to speak to him thus!

"Have a care!" he said harshly. "I have brought thee thus far, but it remains with me to say if thou shalt go farther."

"It is good," said the boy. "Help me off thy horse and go thy way."

It was too much. In great anger Asaf Khan leaped from his horse. He was about to lift the boy down, to go where he would, if he could, when a quavering voice from a short distance made him pause.

"Who comes here wrangling and disturbing my peace?"

The sound came from behind a clump of bushes to the left, and leaving his horse for a moment, Asaf Khan pulled apart the bushes and stepped through them.

He found himself before a low cave, at the entrance to which sat an old man. A holy man Asaf Khan judged him to be; for he was clothed in tattered garments, his long, white beard was tangled and matted, and his uncut hair hung in straggling wisps about his face. If any doubt remained, the filthy state of his face and hands, of his whole body, would have testified to his holiness. Before him lay a black gourd, and beside him burnt a small fire; while further back, in the gloom of the cave, Asaf Khan saw dimly a couch of dry leaves with a tattered rug thrown upon it. This was some holy hermit; and Asaf Khan gave him respectful greeting.

The old man peered up with blinking eyes, champing his toothless gums, while he passed through his fingers without pause the beads of a rosary that hung round his scraggy neck.

"Go thy way," he said querulously. "This is no time for honest men to be abroad; go to thy village!"

"We be far from our village, Holy One,"

replied Asaf Khan humbly. "I have a boy with me who is sore wounded, and I seek for him shelter from the cold and dew."

Though Asaf Khan spoke thus meekly, in his heart he was angered with the hermit. But he hid his anger; for here was a cave, and could he but persuade the hermit to allow the boy to rest within, he could leave the boy there and go bring food from the village, returning afterwards to the village to pass the night. Leave the boy in the cave for the night he would, whether the hermit said yea or nay; but he would rather that the hermit be willing, else might the old man turn the boy out after Asaf Khan had left for the night.

Having left the boy safely within the cave, it would be none of Asaf Khan's business what became of him afterwards, and he still smarted from the boy's talk of robbers; but if the boy were turned out by the hermit, he might come for shelter to the village with his wounds and bloodstained garments.

A rustling of the bushes made him turn; and the boy staggered into the opening before the cave. For a moment he swayed, and then would have fallen had not Asaf Khan started forward and caught him.

Then was Asaf Khan's heart filled with pity for the boy, and he forgave him the words he spoke on the hillside. Was it not for his sake that the boy suffered thus? Because he would not show them the way to the robbers' camp had the men of his village served him

thus. Not only thus had the boy suffered; he was now become an outcast without home or village; and all for that he would not betray one who had befriended him. Laying the boy down gently, Asaf Khan turned to the hermit.

"Let him rest here this one night only, Holy One," he said earnestly, "and to-morrow I shall take him hence; else will he surely die. It is but little I ask. I shall bring food, both for him and for thee, and also will I give thee—see!" and he displayed a ring that sparkled and glittered in the firelight.

Asaf Khan had even then great knowledge of men and how they may be bent to serve the will of another. One may be won by soft speeches, one by fear, another by reason, still another by gold. The hermit feared not death, for he had given up all that makes life worth living; he could not reason, for his brain was clouded with age; of praise he received measure without stint from all who approached him; remained gold, and however old and foolish a man may be, ever his hand goes out to gold. The hermit's eyes sparkled, and he held out a skinny hand.

"The boy may stay," he stuttered eagerly. "Give me the ring."

Asaf Khan threw him the ring. Clutching it eagerly, the old man bent mumbling and mouthing over his treasure, the spittle from his toothless gums running down his beard and forming a small pool on the floor.

Asaf Khan laughed harshly. "Verily, a

Holy One!" he said, and turned to the boy, who was now sitting up. "There must be a village near by for this man to be here, I shall return shortly with food."

"Bring me a knife."

Asaf Khan stared at the request. "A knife?"

"A knife, I said," repeated the boy in a hard voice, staring at Asaf Khan, a strange look in his eyes. "Bring me a knife, or I eat no food. I have no money to pay thee for the knife; but some of the jewels upon thy person would have been my father's had he lived."

With an oath Asaf Khan left the spot. The boy on intent enraged him, always had. He could not now slay this boy, but when he was healed of his wounds he should be taught with a stick to bear himself more humbly towards his betters.

The village was not far; hardly had Asaf Khan passed the next turn than he saw the lights glimmering below. He hurried down, barely in time to obtain what he needed and leave the village before the gates were closed for the night. In most villages he would have been too late; but the village was a large one, the land in these parts was at peace, and therefore were the gates kept open till an hour after sundown.

To find the cave in the darkness on his return was no easy task; and it was not till he had called and the boy replied that he could find the spot. The boy was still sitting without the cave, and the hermit still gloating over his treasure when Asaf Khan arrived.

Throwing down the provisions he had brought, Asaf Khan blew the fire into a blaze and began to cook some food.

The boy watched him for a while in silence. Presently he spoke. "Where is my knife?"

With a curse Asaf Khan threw across to him a knife he had purchased in the village. It was not of the best, for these may be obtained only in cities; but it would slay a man.

The boy picked up the knife and tested the edge. Then he tried the point on his sandal. Apparently satisfied, he slipped the knife into his belt.

"Put no salt in my food," he said, "lest it cause the wounds to fester. Salt rubbed in wounds heals them, eaten, it causes them to fester."

Of this strange thing Asaf Khan had never heard before. Nor did he think it true; for often had he been wounded, yet never had he denied himself salt, wounded or well. But the boy may have heard this from some hakim, and he believed it. It was a small matter to leave the salt out of the boy's portion; to irritate him might bring on the fever which Asaf Khan dreaded, for he would then have the boy on his hands for many days. "Very well," he replied, "and may the food choke thee, thankless one!"

After that there was silence between the two till the food was eaten and what remained put away for the morning.

"Now get thee within the cave," said Asaf Khan. "I will sleep across the entrance lest

some jackal, smelling the blood on thy clothes, come in the night and disturb thee."

The boy winced as if he had been struck; but going inside without a word, drew some of the leaves to the other side of the cave and lay down. The hermit nodded and dozed near the fire till he rolled over and fell asleep; and presently Asaf Khan also slept.

It takes little to wake a Pathan, more especially when that Pathan is a warrior and sleeps on the hillside, snatching a little rest ere he again pushes on to escape the avengers on his track. Asaf Khan's eyes opened, and in an instant he was wide awake. With a swift movement he flung out his hand, barely in time, and seized in an iron grip the wrist of the hand that held the descending knife. A twist, and the knife fell tinkling to the ground. With a scream of rage the boy fixed his teeth in Asaf Khan's arm. Asaf Khan struck fiercely with his disengaged hand, and the boy staggered back half stunned. Whipping out his knife, Asaf Khan sprang to his feet and poised the weapon aloft for the death stroke. But something in the boy's fearless attitude made him pause. What madness had seized the boy?

"Thou would'st have my life, and therefore would'st thou not have salt in thy food," he said grimly. "And for this thou would'st on our journey have had me go to a village, that there thou might'st proclaim Asaf Khan chief of the robbers?"

"Asaf Khan, the devil who has slain the

young men of my village," said the boy defiantly. "When I saw thee at the gate, I knew our young men had failed and were dead, slain by thee and thy band, else hadst thou not been there; and therefore did I let thee bring me with thee, feigning a weakness greater than I felt so that I might get a chance to slay thee. I have failed. Slay me; I fear not death!"

"The man's tale, then, was false. Thou didst tell them the way?"

"The man's tale was true; I told them not the way. Thou hast thyself dressed the wounds they made because I would not speak. I am no traitor!" and the boy drew himself up proudly.

Asaf Khan laughed harshly. Stepping to where lay the fallen knife, he picked it up, and slipping the blade into a crack into a boulder, bent it until it broke. Throwing the pieces far into the darkness, he turned again to the boy who had been watching him in silence.

"Thou art a fool. But even fools may be dangerous; therefore will I draw thy teeth."

"If I can I will yet slay thee. A boulder cast upon the head of a sleeping man kills as surely as the knife; but to die with the head crushed in by a stone is a dog's death; thou being a warrior, I asked for the knife."

"Have done this foolishness!" said Asaf Khan angrily. He knew the boy's motive now, and thought him a fool for his pains. The boy would have avenged the men of his

village whom he thought Asaf Khan had slain, and was ready to sacrifice his life in the attempt. To be faithful to one's village is expected of all men; but after the men of the village had turned against the boy and sought to slay him, to Asaf Khan's mind the boy was a fool to risk his life in seeking revenge for their supposed deaths. But he must enlighten the boy, or in the end he would be forced in self defence to slay him.

"Know, O fool," he said, "that the young men of thy village live. Not all, but most. Of the robber band there remains but me. I fled for my life, the last of my band, and but passed thy village with intent to slay thee, thinking thou hadst told them the way."

The boy started forward and placed his hand on Asaf Khan's arm, "Is this the truth?"

Asaf Khan shook the hand off impatiently. "It is true. Else why am I here, burdened with thee?"

"I have lost the ring!" wailed the old hermit. The noise had awakened him, and in his alarm the ring had slipped from his hand. Uttering childish cries of woe he now sought with groping fingers among the ashes of the fire the treasure he had lost. "My ring! My beautiful ring!" and with feeble breath he blew the smouldering embers into a blaze.

The ring had rolled a short distance, and lay sparkling in the firelight; but the rheumy eyes of the half blind old man could not perceive it, and he continued to wail and lament his lost ring till the boy picked it up and gave

it to him. With trembling hands the hermit clasped the ring to his breast, babbling his thanks to the one who had restored to him his lost treasure.

Suddenly the boy cast himself upon the ground, clasping Asaf Khan's feet and placing his forehead against them. "I have done wrong."

With rough hands Asaf Khan pushed him back and dragged him to his feet. "A brave man grovels not but to deceive; would'st deceive me again? As for what thou would'st have done," he continued with grim humour, "it is naught; it is but thy strange way of requiting a kindness done. Bites and abuse for a small kindness, a knife in the back for a greater kindness. Go to thy rest," he said harshly, "and thank Allah thou art a boy. Hadst thou been a man, thou should'st have died for this!"

In silence the boy entered the cave. The hermit again nodded over the embers; and Asaf Khan slept.

For twelve days Asaf Khan tarried in that place; till the boy was healed of his wounds, and that came to pass which forced Asaf Khan to leave hurriedly and travel far. For the first six of these days did Asaf Khan dress the boy's wounds; and then the scabs came and there was naught to do till the scabs fell off. Each morning went Asaf Khan to the village, returning at evening with food which he cooked for himself and the boy, giving some also to the old hermit, to whom he had given another ring to let the boy stay on. For a

few nights he slept across the mouth of the cave, but afterwards he slept at nights in the village.

Fresh clothes and bedding had he bought for himself and the boy, and a new saddle and bridle for the horse ; though he rode not the horse in his journeys to and from the village, hobbling it on a flat without the cave where there was plenty of good grass.

He spent his days in the village, for, as he told the boy, he would not that men should see him at the cave and know him for a homeless man, and also for another reason, but this reason he told not to the boy.

The village was a large one, and in the streets were many shops, good shops, one even that of a gold and silversmith ; and as in this bazaar were foodstuffs also sold, it was there Asaf Khan went to make his daily purchases.

Asaf Khan had little money by him ; and when he saw the goldsmith's shop he bethought him that here was a chance to sell one or two of the jewels so as to have money to buy his provisions. One cannot give a ring in payment for a handful of dal (pulse) or a seer of flour, nor even for a piece of meat.

The goldsmith sat within his shop, peering out at the world with his little black eyes through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched upon a hawk-like nose of great size. So great was the nose that Asaf Khan wondered if it were always that size, or if a bee had stung the man.

The goldsmith looked up as Asaf Khan

entered his shop, and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"Salaam o aliekaum. In what can I serve thee?"

His voice was weak, and came with a snuffling sound through his great nose. Asaf Khan put him down for a Persian, or perchance a man from Hindustan, for the men of the Border have harsh, guttural voices.

"I would sell my ring," said Asaf Khan, and held up to view a ring he had taken from his belt that morning.

The goldsmith's eyes sparkled covetously, for the ring was a good one and worth much money. He glanced swiftly from the ring to the face and clothes of the man who would sell it. This was a simple man of the Border; either he had found the ring, or he had stolen it; in either case he would not know its worth.

"A ring?" he said, and taking the trinket in his hand, eyed it carelessly. "The gold is of fair quality"—all men know good gold from bad—"but the stone is worthless."

Now, Asaf Khan knew that the stone was a good one, and worth a great price; therefore had he chosen this ring to sell, that he might not have to sell another for many days.

"Thief!" he exclaimed in great wrath. "Give me back the ring; I will go look for an honest man! The stone worthless indeed!"

"Softly," snuffled the goldsmith, stroking his black beard with a dirty hand. "Let me look at the stone again; perchance I was mistaken."

For an hour they haggled and bargained; till at last, having wrung a fair price from the man, Asaf Khan left the shop.

"A worthless stone!" he growled, as the goldsmith told out the money, "I picked the best of——" he caught himself up and glanced keenly at the goldsmith. The man had not heard; he was still counting out the money. Nevertheless was Asaf Khan wrath with himself for the thing he had done. Never, since he was a boy, had he allowed his tongue to run on in this wise. If the man had heard, he would have known where this ring came from there were others. Seizing the money he hastily left the shop, thankful the goldsmith had not heard the unguarded speech.

But the goldsmith had heard. This man had other rings, and his soul coveted those rings. The one that lay sparkling in his palm rejoiced his heart, and he would have more.

Would the man sell? The man might sell, but where was the goldsmith to find money to buy these rings, seeing that he kept little by him, sending his money secretly to his brother in Kabul where it would be safer than in this village, keeping but little for his present needs. But the rings he would have, by fair means or by foul; and withdrawing to the inner part of his shop he sat immersed in thought, meditating how he might best get these jewels his heart coveted.

Asaf Khan was right in thinking this man came from Persia; but he knew not a secret the man kept locked in his breast and which

none save he and his wife knew, a secret that would have brought him death, sudden and sure, were it known in the village. For this goldsmith was no Mussulman. Though outwardly professing the Faith, and attending the mosque with the Faithful, he was nevertheless a Jew, performing the rites of his own faith in the secrecy of his chamber. Had Asaf Khan known this, he might have been more on his guard; for all men know that when a Jew covets aught, nothing will turn him from his purpose.

Thus it was, that when Asaf Khan passed that way next day, a figure shrouded in the folds of a boorkha brushed past him. In itself this was naught, for many shrouded figures passed him that day in the village, and the streets were narrow; but the folds of the boorkha slipped from the fingers of this one, and ere they could be gathered again Asaf Khan caught a glimpse of her face.

White and pink was her face, like the maidens of Iran. Dark, and lightly pencilled were the arches of her brows, and dark the long lashes that veiled the gazelle-like eyes cast down in modest confusion at the accident.

But was it an accident? Asaf Khan had known of boorkhas slipping from fingers that of purpose let them fall. Here was an adventure, and the woman was fair. Asaf Khan turned carelessly and followed the figure.

Reaching the end of the street, the woman paused a moment or two, and then retraced her steps. Neither to the right nor to the left

did she look, but as she passed Asaf Khan she lost her slipper, and had to pause for a moment to recover it. Then did Asaf Khan know that the loosening of the boorkha was no accident, and when the woman moved on, he followed; but at a distance so that none should know it was the woman whom he followed.

At the door of the goldsmith's shop the woman entered; and though Asaf Khan waited long, she came not forth again. Passing the shop, he glanced within; the goldsmith sat alone, polishing a cup. Either the woman belonged to the household of the goldsmith, or she visited there. In any case the goldsmith would know of her and her dwelling. He approached the shop.

The goldsmith looked up from his work. "In good time hast thou come," he said heartily, "for even now hath she of my house in passing asked me if I can get her another such ring as I bought from thee."

So she was the goldsmith's wife. No wonder, being the wife of such a man, she let her boorkha slip when passing a man like Asaf Khan. Perchance she had seen Asaf Khan in the shop when he sold the ring, perchance she came upon him by chance; it was all one. Declaring he had no other rings, Asaf Khan left the shop.

And now to forward the adventure; for to let it rest there was not in Asaf Khan's nature. To him the love of the moth for the star was sheer idiocy; he wanted his love close. He looked at the houses on either side of the goldsmith's shop.

The goldsmith lived in an upper storey above his shop, an upper storey with small, latticed windows and no doors. But latticed windows are no bar if there be one within who will open them ; and one window overlooked a neighbouring house, a small house of one storey.

Now, this house had been occupied the day before, but lo ! it was now empty. Surely Fortune smiled upon Asaf Khan this day, some friendly djinn had done him this service. He asked a passer by to whom the house belonged. It belonged to the goldsmith, and once more Asaf Khan entered the shop.

The goldsmith looked up from his work. " Hast brought another ring to sell ? "

" I come to rent a house, that to the right of thy shop. I am told it is thine."

The goldsmith dropped his face over his work to hide the cunning smile he would not have Asaf Khan see. Presently he looked up, knitting his brows and pursing up his lips.

" The house is mine," he admitted, " but—it is already taken by another."

" I will give thee a higher rent."

The goldsmith seized his hair and tore it in seeming woe. " Alas ! Alas ! Had I but known ! Why camest thou not to me before ? The house had been thine. Now it is too late, the papers are signed. Alas ! "

" I will pay thee double rent."

The goldsmith ceased tearing his hair, and gave Asaf Khan a cunning look.

" Why this heat ? " he asked. " Is there treasure buried within the house ? "

Then Asaf Khan knew he was like to betray himself by his eagerness; to have the goldsmith think he would hire the house for other purpose than to live in.

"I am one who likes not to be crossed in a wish," he said carelessly, "and care not what I give so that I have my will. But if the papers be signed," and he shrugged his shoulders, "I must even seek a dwelling elsewhere."

"Nay," said the goldsmith, detaining him as he would have left the shop. "It may not be too late. I will see this other man, and will let thee know his answer to-morrow. Is thy home far?"

"My home is very far," replied Asaf Khan, who had his tale prepared for the curious. "I travel to Kabul, and tarried here a few days, staying in the house of a friend who dwells on the farther side of the village. I like the place, and would stay here longer; but I must not outstay my welcome in the house of my friend, and therefore seek I a house of mine own. To-morrow I will come for thine answer," and he left the shop, the goldsmith this time making no attempt to stay him.

The next day Asaf Khan went not near the goldsmith's house. It might be that he was mistaken, and that accident indeed had caused the boorkha to fall. Then would he lose much money by renting a house for which he had no use, and would gain naught. Money is not easy to come by, and even in his youth Asaf Khan knew the value of money. Not for itself did he want money, but for the things which

money bought, a good steed, firearms that would not fail a man in time of need, the love of woman—for attendants must be bribed with gifts. All things that a man loves may be bought with money, save, perchance, happiness ; but this a man makes or mars for himself.

Many boorkhas passed Asaf Khan that day, but no fold slipped from careless fingers. Either the woman came not forth that day, or she walked in the main street, thinking Asaf Khan would come there. At last to that street he went.

The goldsmith sat within his shop, and his eyes narrowed when he saw Asaf Khan ; but Asaf Khan passed on, and the goldsmith again dropped his eyes to his work. But now as he worked he sang :

" The tiger prowls through the long grass;
In search of his prey ;
Ever his eyes glance hither and thither
In search of his prey.
' I will catch this monarch of the wilds
In my net,' said the hunter,
' I will get him in my toils and will strip him of his warm coat
To make me a rug against the winter.
I will send forth my tame hind
Who will lead him to me ;
So shall he fall into the net,
And become the spoil of the hunter.' "

A veiled figure passed through the shop into the street, and the goldsmith ceased his song. Asaf Khan walked to the end of the street ;

but though more than one boorkha paused as he passed, and dark eyes gazed upon him through the net across the eyeholes—for Asaf Khan was a proper man, a man upon whom women loved to look—the woman of his thoughts was not there, else she made no sign.

He retraced his steps, and saw a boorkha coming towards him. The height was the same; almost he could have sworn to the walk, that graceful swaying of the boorkha from side to side was surely hers. She passed, and a handkerchief, a tiny scrap of lace and muslin, fell from the folds of her boorkha and lay unnoticed on the ground—but not by Asaf Khan. It was she, and snatching up the flimsy morsel, Asaf Khan went his way. To-morrow he would see the goldsmith about the house.

The goldsmith greeted him with oily smiles. He was willing to let the house—at a price; and over this price he and Asaf Khan haggled long. The man who had rented the house would not let the goldsmith off his bargain unless he received much money; this money Asaf Khan must pay, and also the rent of the house. So said the goldsmith, and in the end Asaf Khan had to agree. It cost another ring to rent the house, and the goldsmith chuckled as he put the bauble away in his safe. This ring was come by cheaper than the first, for in truth no one had rented the house. He had now two rings; he would get the rest even more cheaply than he had got this one.

Next day Asaf Khan shifted into the house.

It was a small place of two rooms, but it would serve his need. Indeed, it was as large as many houses in that land, where people lead a simple life, their wants few. Furniture there was none, so Asaf Khan bought him a couple of rugs and a bedstead. More furniture he needed not, for he would eat in the bazaar, and occupy the house only at night. Even at night, he hoped he soon would not occupy it.

That day Asaf Khan told the hermit and the boy that he would sleep that night in the village. He took them food, which the boy was now well enough to cook, and in the late afternoon he returned to the village and bought him a short ladder.

Now, ladders are kept without the house, standing against the wall or lying beside it; but this ladder Asaf Khan brought inside, for he had need of it to help him in his adventure, and he stood it against the wall in a corner.

Mounting the ladder, he attacked the ceiling with his knife; and though he had to work slowly, that no noise be heard without, the roof was but a foot of earth on a bed of boards, and within the hour he had made a hole through which he could pass his body. But the time was not yet. The goldsmith would still be waking; he must wait till the man slept and the woman could give the signal.

Even now he was not sure of success; the woman's chamber might lie on the other side. Though he had studied the goldsmith's house from the street he could gather naught of the rooms of the upper storey, how many there

were, or how they were placed. It might be that the room in which the goldsmith himself slept was on that side, and he must be wary

Gradually the village sank into silence. The hum of life died away, one by one the lights went out, the dogs ceased to bark, till at last the occasional cry of the watchman was alone heard, and the village was sunk in slumber.

Then crept Asaf Khan out on to the house-top; and standing against the wall of the goldsmith's house that his figure be not seen against the sky by some late passer by, he coughed softly.

In silence he waited, but there came no reply. Asaf Khan was not cast down; many times he had waited thus beneath a window, and he knew a thousand things might delay the reply. That Asaf Khan had taken the house, the woman must know; for he had been of purpose many times in and out that day, and she must have seen him; without doubt she would know he was now on the roof. Again he coughed; and this time the window opened softly. Asaf Khan pressed against the wall in silence. It might be the goldsmith.

Presently a small pebble fell beside him, and Asaf Khan drew the ladder up from the room below. Placing it against the wall, in a moment he was up and at the casement.

Here was a fine matter! Across the window behind the lattice were wooden bars! Here was Asaf Khan outside an open window at night; within, a woman alone, a woman moreover who had called him—and these infernal

bars were between! They were of wood; and placing his hand upon one, Asaf Khan strove to break it. But the wood was strong, and he dared not put forth all his strength lest the bar snap suddenly with a noise.

"A saw!" he whispered wrathfully. "Bring me a saw and I will soon cut through this devil of a bar!"

But the woman shook her head. "I have no saw," she murmured. "To-morrow bring thou one. But what if bars be between; can I not see thine eyes, the face of my beloved which I have dreamt of for two nights and days? Is it not enough for thee also?"

Indeed it was not, thought Asaf Khan angrily. He wanted more than to look. But look was all he could do that night; so heartening him with the thought of the morrow, when he would bring a saw and there would be no bar between, he talked to the woman as he knew well how to talk, telling her that her eyes were twin stars, her lips more scarlet than the pomegranate blossom, her waist like the stalk of the lily, and other lover-like nonsense which only a woman in love will believe.

Greedily the woman drank in the words of flattery, telling Asaf Khán of the sad life she led with her husband the goldsmith, whom she loved not nor had ever loved. Naught did he give her save clothes and food. Not a jewel had she; and shame was her portion when she went to the houses of her friends wearing no jewels while their fingers and toes were stiff with rings.

Asaf Khan had brought with him a ring; for even when women love, it pleasures them to receive gifts from the loved one, and he gave her the ring promising her other two on the morrow. Always was Asaf Khan free of gifts to the women he loved; for he knew he would receive them back with added presents when, tiring he would leave, and the woman would have him stay.

But the wind blows chill through the garments of one who stands upon a ladder at night, and words are but cold comfort to a hot lover. Also a man on a ladder shows against the sky, so presently Asaf Khan descended to his room.

The next night Asaf Khan took with him a saw, a sharp saw and a strong one, taking with him also oil, that the saw make no sound. The answer to his cough came soon this night; and climbing the ladder, Asaf Khan began to saw through the bar. Alas! for his hopes. Each wooden bar contained within it a strong, iron rod! Of a truth this goldsmith deserved to be burnt in everlasting fire!

Again he had to stand mournfully on the ladder talking to the woman, while the night wind blew chill through his garments. He gave her the rings he had brought, promising her more, and descended sorrowfully to his room.

Next night he took with him a file.

But a file makes much noise unless it is used slowly and with care, so that Asaf Khan had filed through but one bar and part of a

second, when the dawn began to break in the east and he had to descend hurriedly. But he left with the woman another ring.

Four rings had this woman cost him, not counting the ring he had given for the rent of the house; but she was worth it, even if he received not the rings again.

The fourth night Asaf Khan cut through the bars and entered the woman's chamber. He cast a swift glance round; for though love burned hot in his breast, he had not ceased to be a warrior, and in a strange place a man should always be on his guard. It was a woman's chamber, with the usual litter of women's trifles, and at the farther end was a door. Was it bolted?

The woman shook her head. "There is no bolt on this side," she whispered, "but my husband sleeps two chambers away and will hear naught. To-day was I a proud woman in the house of my brother's sister-in-law, for though her rings were more, mine were of greater price. Hast brought me more rings, beloved?"

Decidedly, this woman was greedy. But Asaf Khan gave her two rings he had brought, for in a moment he would be more than repaid. With fierce arms he embraced her, raining hot kisses on her face and neck; but even as he thought her at last his, there came a shuffling step and the woman tore herself free.

"My husband!" she gasped. "What fiend hath disturbed him! Haste, my love, lest he find thee here and publish my shame abroad!"

Almost was Asaf Khan minded to stay where he was and slay the spoil-sport as he entered ; but the man might cry out and the cry be heard ; or the woman might scream. Then would men come to learn the meaning of the cry in the night, and how should he escape from the village, with the gate fast and the village aroused ? Also the woman had now six rings, and none of these would he receive back if he left the village now and in this way.

In haste he slipped through the window, putting the bars into place after him, and descended to his room.

On the following night the woman was coy and timid, and would not admit him to her chamber, though she took the ring he brought. Her husband had come to her chamber after Asaf Khan had left, she said, and though he questioned her not, had walked about the room and had even gone to the window and taken hold of a bar. Allah be thanked ! It was a firm bar upon which he put his hands, or he must have known all. Now he worked below, making a bangle for a girl who was to be married next day, and he would hear if Asaf Khan came through the window for the chamber was over the room in which he worked.

So again had Asaf Khan to stand on the ladder while the night wind blew chill through his clothes. Of a truth, never before had he fared thus ; and though the woman was fair, had it not been for the rings he had given her, he would have gone his way and sought her love no more.

Love cannot remain at white heat for long whether that love be crowned with success or not, and already was his love for this woman beginning to cool. Also the night wind blowing through his garments served to cool his ardour.

The next morning he entered the goldsmith's shop. He had bought bedding, a saddle and a bridle, and also he had furnished a house. Therefore had he used much money and had little left ; he would sell another ring.

The goldsmith sat polishing an ear-ring ; and as Asaf Khan entered, with a swift movement he thrust something beneath a cloth. The movement was quick, but not quick enough to escape the keen eyes of Asaf Khan. It was a ring the goldsmith had hidden, one of the rings Asaf Khan had given to the goldsmith's wife !

Naught said Asaf Khan of what he had seen ; but a steely glint came into his eye that boded ill for the goldsmith. Nor did he speak of the ring he wished to sell, asking instead where the best cooking pots could be bought, as he was tired of eating in the bazaar and would cook his own food.

For long Asaf Khan paced without the village, thinking over this matter of the ring which he had given to the goldsmith's wife, and which he had seen in the hands of the goldsmith. The goldsmith had the ring, and did not wish Asaf Khan to know he had it ; what did this mean ? Had he discovered all, and did he mean to trap Asaf Khan, knowing that it was from Asaf Khan his wife had

received the ring? It must be so, else why did he hide the ring? What had he done to his wife?

With such questions did Asaf Khan rack his brains all that day, impatiently waiting for night, when he would know the truth; and when night came, he held his knife in his hand as he coughed the signal.

To his surprise the woman leaned from the window immediately.

"Come," she whispered softly. "He is asleep."

Asaf Khan's brows knitted in a frown. Here was matter for thought. He had expected the woman to call to him in fear and trembling; but in her voice was no fear, nor did she speak as if aught untoward had occurred. The goldsmith had got from his wife a ring he knew he had not given her; had he not questioned her? What if he now stood behind his wife, the point of his knife at her back, forcing her to call in honeyed words the lover he would slay as he climbed.

Asaf Khan climbed the ladder; but he used only one hand to climb, the other was grasping his knife, the long blade of which he would plunge into the throat of the man as he leaned out to strike. But no one leaned out; save for the woman the chamber was empty, and Asaf Khan stepped within.

And now all thought of the goldsmith and the ring he put aside, for at last he would receive the reward of his patience. But alas! it was not to be. Even as he clasped the woman

to him there came that shuffling step and the woman started from his arms in terror.

Then was Asaf Khan wroth ; for a new thought had entered his mind, and at first he would have stayed in the room and slain the man as he entered. But he must also slay the woman, for she would scream when she saw the man killed, and Asaf Khan had never slain a woman. He would leave ; but now his eyes were opened, and he would have a fitting revenge upon this man and woman who had served him thus.

For he doubted not now it was all of a plan to get from him his rings without paying for them. The bars within the lattice, the shuffling step that came just in time, it was all part of a cunning plan. But they knew not with whom they had to do. They knew not that Asaf Khan was as wily as brave, and would as soon be worsted in a fight as tricked. But they should know to their cost ere they had done with him. Slipping down the ladder, he descended to his room.

In the morning he went to the goldsmith with the tale of a ring he wished to sell. He would bring the ring at even, he said, for now he had to go see the friend with whom he had stayed when he first came to the village, and would return late. The goldsmith nodded, for he was not over anxious to pay good money for a ring his wife would get for naught, and Asaf Khan left the shop.

The lips of the goldsmith curled in a crafty smile as he thought of the wait in the passage till the gentle stamp of his wife's heel warned

him that it was time to shuffle his feet. But this must be the last time, lest the man grow suspicious. Next day he would take his wife to her brother's and there leave her ; for who knows the heart of a woman ? Some day she might not stamp till too late.

It was growing dark when Asaf Khan came to the goldsmith's shop ; but though the man had closed and shuttered all the windows, he stood at the door waiting for Asaf Khan. As well purchase the ring, for he would get it cheap and would not after to-night get any more through his wife. Shutting the door after Asaf Khan so that prying eyes should not look within, he held out his hand for the ring.

In an instant he was dashed to the ground ; and ere he could cry out for help, he was gagged and bound.

" Lie thou there till the morning," said Asaf Khan grimly, " I go to thy wife's chamber with the ring."

The goldsmith knew well what Asaf Khan meant. The man had discovered the trick they had played on him. He writhed and twisted about on the floor, striving to reach the door and kick it, that haply some passer by might hear the sound and come in ; but with a harsh laugh Asaf Khan dragged him to the farther end of the shop and bound him to one of the posts that upheld the roof.

This time Asaf Khan waited not to cough, but climbed to the window at once ; and when the woman chided him for his want of caution, he laughed. But he would know how the

woman warned her husband, for this knowledge might prove useful on some future day, and for a space he kept up the play. Again he clasped the woman in his arms, and then came the signal for which he waited. Gently fell her heel on the boarded floor, and she strove to tear herself from his embrace. "My husband!" she whispered, but Asaf Khan laughed.

With swift fingers he bound a cloth about her mouth, stifling her screams, and as he worked he chuckled.

"Thy husband lies in his shop below like a trussed fowl," he said, embracing her fiercely. "He cannot come hither to disturb us this night, beat thou thy pretty heel never so hard."

The woman struggled hard to escape, but her strength was naught to the might of Asaf Khan.

When Asaf Khan descended the ladder that night, he took with him a casket which he had found in a box beneath the bed, a casket in which lay all the rings he had given the woman, and also many jewels of the goldsmith; and before leaving he bound the woman to the bed lest she raise an alarm before he made good his escape.

To leave the village was an easy matter. The guard was not strict, the wall in places low; and in a few minutes Asaf Khan dropped from the village wall and made for the hill.

The boy, now healed of his wounds, was still awake; and Asaf Khan curtly bade him put their few things together as they left the cave at once.

"Why this haste?" asked the boy suspiciously. "Thou hast been strange of late, and it is in my mind thou hast again killed a man."

"Which would not be strange," quoth Asaf Khan; "for I have slain many, and to slay one more would be a small matter. But I have slain no man this night—mayhap I have made one. I have robbed a man," and he displayed the casket, though he opened it not lest the hermit see. "But this man would have robbed me—nay, this man and his wife did rob me—so I do no wrong if I rob him in turn. Come, mount; for we must be far ere dawn."

CHAPTER IV

A BORDER WARRIOR IN THE MAKING

ASAF KHAN travelled far that night, though not as far as he had fled with the boy the day his band was destroyed. Now he had little to fear, and also one cannot travel as far by night as by day even when the roads are good and are known to the traveller; here the road was a mere track, and he had not been this way before. But none would pursue, so there was no need to press his horse, and often he or the boy would dismount and walk beside the animal so as to lighten its burden. He travelled far, but he could have been farther from the village had he so wished; farther he would have been, twice as far, had he known the real nature of the goldsmith and the race from which he sprang.

The goldsmith, he thought, would seek to hide the matter, and would speak to no one of what had occurred that night, lest shame be his portion in the eyes of the village; but in thinking thus Asaf Khan was mistaken.

When day came and the goldsmith opened not his shop, folk wondered; but to every

man his own business, and they passed on. But one had business that day with the goldsmith, and coming to the door and finding it not yet open, he beat upon it. Because the door was not bolted within, it swung open, and the man entered. At first he saw naught; but a noise made him look towards the further end of the shop, and there he beheld the goldsmith bound to a post.

"Tobah!" he exclaimed in much concern. "Who hath done this evil deed!" and with swift hands he untied the goldsmith and removed the gag from his mouth.

At first the goldsmith could not speak, so long had be been tied and so dreadful the thoughts that had haunted his brain through the night; but seeing the man look curiously round, and fearing he would search the house to see if the one who had done the deed were still lurking within, the goldsmith made a great effort and spoke.

"It was a thief," he mumbled, for his lips were sore from the gag. "He bound me with intent to rob my shop; but someone passing must have alarmed him, for he left when he had bound me. I will go up to my chamber and put salve on my lips. Stay thou here till I return."

Now, had Asaf Khan known this man for a Jew, he had not taken the box of jewels and then ridden at his ease thinking none would pursue. To a Pathan, the honour of his House is above all things. To have it known that a man had been in the apartments of his

women in his absence was to dishonour his House, and he would have hidden the shameful secret deep within his breast ; but with a Jew it is otherwise, his wealth is dearer to his heart than aught else in this world. It was of his jewels the Jew thought, not of his wife, of the jewels which he kept under the bed ; and paying no attention to the bound woman, he darted beneath the bed, raised the lid of the box, and peered within. Alas ! his worst fears were realised, the jewel casket was empty !

Then did the Jew lift up his voice and bewail the loss of his treasure, smiting his breast and tearing his beard in the extremity of his woe. But presently he bethought him of the man below and ceased his cries. The man might come up, and would see the woman bound to the bed. He must have time to think ere he made known what had befallen him. For he must recover the jewels, and to recover them he needed the help of the men of the village ; how best to gain this help.

His cunning brain worked feverishly, while with restless fingers he plucked at his beard, his eyes wandering from the bound woman to the window. If he made known his loss and offered a reward, the men would help him pursue the thief. But what would be said when it was known, as known it would be, that from his wife's room had the jewels been taken. And at night. He could say they were taken from the shop ; but the thief would say they were taken from this room, and would

show the bars. He looked intently at his wife.

Had the woman in truth been bound against her will? The man had known of the trick they would have played upon him; how came he by this knowledge? The woman must have told him, for thus only could he have known. In the day he had told his wife that this matter of the rings must cease, and lo! in the evening the man knew. She must have told him. She had gone out during the day—to visit the house of her cousin, so she said—it was then she told the man. Mayhap she had told the man thinking he would take her with him when he fled. Then came darker thoughts. Had the heel always been beaten in time? Or was the signal only given when the man was ready to depart? It must be so. He had been the one tricked! Fool that he was, he had been tricked by this foul harlot and her lover, and now he was robbed!

Stepping to a cupboard he took from it a knife, and with a swift movement drew it across his wife's throat. Hardly had her struggles ceased, than he unbound her, and throwing the bonds and knife into the cupboard, rushed weeping and wailing from the room.

The man met him on the stairs. "Why this outcry, O goldsmith? Hath the thief been here also?"

"The murderer!" shrieked the goldsmith. "He hath slain my wife! Go, call her sister; tell her what hath befallen this house! The robber would have robbed me while my wife

slept ; but she woke and would have raised an alarm so he slew her ! Alas ! Alas ! Who will avenge my wrongs upon this murderer ! "

" That will I and all the men of the village," replied the man. " I will send men to thee ; and after I have carried to her sister the sad news, I will return," and he sped off down the street, crying the news as he went.

In a few minutes a crowd had assembled round the goldsmith's shop, and to them he related how a few days since a man had come to his shop and had sold him a ring, afterwards renting from him the house that lay to the right of his shop. This man had come to sell him another ring the previous night ; but the man had sold him no ring. The man had bound him with intent to rob him of all he had ; but hearing a noise outside, perchance the step of one who passed, the man, fearing the other might enter and discover him, had left hurriedly. Now, in the morning when he was released, did the goldsmith find that the man had been to his sleeping chamber and had there murdered his wife, and had fled, taking with him a casket of jewels ; though how the man had reached the chamber he could not say.

A glance into the next house showed them the hole in the roof and made all things plain ; but when they climbed to the window and saw the bars sawn away, they smiled in their beards. This was not the work of a night. But what would you ? This man was old and ill favoured, the woman was young, and men said the one who had fled was a proper man. That

the man who had fled had slain the woman they now doubted. In truth, they doubted the whole of the goldsmith's tale, thinking he had surprised the lovers and had slain his guilty wife. Afterwards he had descended to his shop and tied himself so as to deceive the relations of the woman lest they be angered at her death.

That he had been robbed, they believed, else would not he have offered a reward ; and for the sake of the reward they would help him pursue the robber. As for the woman—they shrugged their shoulders ; it was no business of theirs, and the woman had sinned ; they would have done the same themselves.

And so it came to pass that fifty well armed mẹn rode out of the village gate an hour after sunrise in search of the man who had robbed the goldsmith and murdered the goldsmith's wife. They knew he had a horse, for the one from whom Asaf Khan had bought the saddle and bridle remembered ; and though no one had seen the horse, men do not buy saddle and bridle for naught. They would spread out and search till they found a fresh track leading from the village, and this they would follow ; for no horseman had left the village that morning, and such a track would only be made by the man they sought.

But they had no need to seek, for lo ! even as they passed through the gate, there came the old hermit of the hill hobbling along painfully with the aid of a stick.

Now, the hermit had begged from Asaf Kahn

a ring when he left ; but Asaf Khan had refused the gift, had not only refused the gift, but had taken from the hermit the two rings he had before given him, saying that he now needed no service from the hermit and he had need of the rings for the next holy hermit he met. Which was a foolish thing for Asaf Khan to do ; for though he might not venerate this hermit, there were many who did, and the anger of those others would burn hot against one who had treated a holy man thus.

Had the boy known of this matter of the taking back of the rings, he might have dissuaded Asaf Khan, though Asaf Khan was not one to be lightly turned aside from what he would do ; but the boy had gone to bring the horse to be saddled, and though when he returned with the horse he saw that the hermit wept, he thought it was because the hermit would receive no more rings, nor have such good food to eat as had been his portion while they dwelt with him in the cave.

Therefore had the boy said naught ; and Asaf Khan went away leaving behind him two men who hated him sore and burned to be revenged upon him for a wrong he had done them ; two men of power moreover, one with the power of wealth, the other with the power of religion, an even greater power than wealth.

It was a great journey for the hermit. For many years he had walked but a few yards a day ; but he made shift with a stick, and grunting and wheezing he crept tottering to the village. Ofttimes he thought he would have

died ; but ever the memory of the beautiful rings he had lost spurred him to fresh effort.

The men crowded about him, marvelling at the sight of the old man so far from his cave ; and to them the holy hermit told his tale of woe.

A man and a boy had come to his cave some days since craving shelter for the boy who was wounded. He knew not who they were, but thought the man was bearing the boy away from his home, for on the first night the boy had tried to slay the man, since when the man had allowed him no weapon. Now the boy was well, and they had left ; but alas ! the ingratitude of mankind. He had sheltered these two in their time of need, asking no return, and now the man, before going, had robbed him.

Two rings he had, two rings given him many years before by the Holy One whose chela (disciple) he had been. Great virtue dwelt in these rings ; for to the country where they lay would they bring great blessing of harvests and victory in war. These rings had the impious one taken ; and now would the land be afflicted with drought and their enemies prevail against them.

It was enough. The reward the goldsmith promised made them eager in pursuit, the tale of the vile treatment meeted out to this Holy One spurred them on ; but when they heard that the loss of the hermit's two rings would bring scarcity to the land and strengthen the arm of their enemies, each man vowed that

never would he return from this quest till he had seized or slain the vile robber and murderer.

But of all this Asaf Khan knew naught; and when the day came he unsaddled his horse beside a stream and he and the boy ate food of which Asaf Khan had brought enough for two days. Here they rested a space, and then proceeded at their ease, each taking it in turn to walk while the other rode. Blithely they went, the merry quips of the boy often bringing a smile to Asaf Khan's stern face.

The boy was a merry companion, but what to do with him now that he was well was a thought that often came to Asaf Khan's mind. Leave the boy to fend for himself he could not. It was for his sake that the boy was an outcast from his village and people; he must seek some good house and place the boy there, leaving with the boy a few jewels to buy himself weapons and a horse when he should become a man. Then could he carve out his own fate as many before him had done on the Border, as Asaf Khan himself was now doing.

So they hurried not in their going, and thus it was that at noon Asaf Khan looked back from a rise and saw a cloud of dust behind them.

Men rode, and rode fast, who were these men? They came from the same direction from which he had come, had they come from the same village? But why such a company? A few the goldsmith might have sent in pursuit of the robber, but these would not have gone far; the reward offered would be small, and robbery was not such a great matter in those parts.

Then why such a stir? Why, if these were men of the village, so great a company? Perchance it was not him they followed. It might even be that they were not men of that village; they may be a party of travellers. Still, it behoved a man to be on his guard, and he looked about him.

To his left stretched a plain, to his right and before him rose hills. To try to cross the plain would be useless. He would never succeed, the pursuers, if indeed they pursued him, could cut across and intercept him. The sides of these hills were too steep for his horse, and he was loth to leave the animal; for what would become of him without a horse? Having captured the horse, they would know he was near, and would disperse over the country warning the villages far and wide. What chance would a man on foot have of escape? Decidedly he must stick to the horse at all costs.

The boy also had looked back, and seeing the cloud of dust and Asaf Khan's uneasiness, nodded his head sagely.

"Said I not so? Thou hast killed a man, and the avengers of blood seek thy life."

"I have killed no man," said Asaf Khan angrily. "These be but travellers faring from one village to another."

Nevertheless, he scanned the hillside anxiously; for travellers ride at an easy pace, whereas these men galloped hard. Presently there came a ravine which ran into the hill, and into this ravine Asaf Khan turned his horse.

If he were mistaken, and it was not he whom the men followed, they would ride straight on. If it were indeed he they followed, they would halt. In any case they would soon overtake him, and here in this ravine he was where he could hold his own and slay many ere he was himself slain, for the ravine was narrow, and in it lay many boulders. He had no gun ; but his revolver he had with him, and for afterwards, when his cartridges were finished and the fighting was hand to hand, he had his knife.

That it should be a fight to the death he had made up his mind. Had it been but as a robber they sought him, fewer men would have come, and they would have come more slowly. Something, what he knew not nor could he guess, had happened in the village, and these men sought, not to capture, but to slay him. Even if they slew him not here, they would take him to their village and there slay him ; and that he would not have. Here he would die the death of a warrior, for he would die fighting to the last, with arms in his hand ; were they to take him to their village, who knew what dog's death he would die ! Never should this be the fate of Asaf Khan. He had lived free, and free he would die.

The ravine was a short one and they soon reached the end. Dismounting, Asaf Khan handed the reins to the boy and returned to the entrance to see what the party that came would do.

They were nearer, and now he could see that it was him they followed, for they waved their

guns above their heads as men do when the prey is in sight. Yet he could not understand why so many came, the matter being a small one, the robbing of a goldsmith of a few jewels. Could these men mistake him for another? Had they lost sight during the night of the one they followed, and seeing him in the morning had mistaken him for the one they pursued. It was possible. But it would be safer for him to be at the end of the ravine when they came, else might they slay him with their guns before they learnt their error. He went back to the boy, and taking the reins from his hand, threw them over a neighbouring rock.

"Perchance it is another they seek," he said in explanation. "But it may be me, and it is well to be prepared."

The boy looked at him curiously. "Thou wilt fight?"

"That will I."

"There be many."

"The more shall I slay."

"If it is indeed thee they seek," reasoned the boy, "would it not be wiser to speak them fair and to go with them to the village where the elders could sit in judgment? Thou hast robbed; but that is no great crime. A fine will be sufficient."

Asaf Khan looked at the boy in angry surprise.

"Hold thy peace, boy!" he said harshly, "nor speak of things beyond thy ken. From here I go not at any man's bidding! If I am slain, many shall die before I am slain! But

thou art a boy ; I had forgotten. Go thou to them when they come. They will not harm thee, for against thee they have naught, whom they have not even seen. So shalt thou save thy life."

While he was speaking Asaf Khan had busied himself raising a heap of boulders from behind which he could fire. It would not serve him long, for the enemy would climb the sides of the ravine and fire down upon him ; but from behind it he would slay a good few, and when the others climbed the sides he would dash out on those in front and die fighting, knife in hand.

The boy watched, a strange look on his face ; but he said nothing further till the heap was raised.

" I will go," he said, and walked towards the entrance to the ravine.

Now, for some strange reason Asaf Khan felt a feeling of loneliness descend upon him as he watched the boy walk down the ravine. True, the boy could have in no way helped him by staying, and the boy was taking a wise course, it was not his quarrel ; yet in his heart he had thought the boy would refuse to go and desert him thus in his strait. He did not blame the lad. To stay was certain death, and it was wise of the boy to go ; but he felt alone, more alone than ever in his life he had felt. He shook himself impatiently. Most men would have acted as the boy had done. And now to prepare for the fray.

What was this ? The boy came running back. He had passed out of the ravine for

a few moments only, and now he came running back.

"They are the men from that village," panted the boy. "They are close, and I saw the faces of some who came with offerings to the hermit."

"Then art thou a fool to have come back," said Asaf Khan grimly. "For if these men seek my life, they will take thine also." But in his heart Asaf Khan was pleased that the boy had proved very man and warrior and had not left the ravine. What matter if the boy died? Better to die young, a warrior, than to live a poltroon. "Where is the casket I gave thee? I would bury it, and the goldsmith shall weep for his lost treasure as long as he shall live."

The boy put his hand to his waistcloth and handed Asaf Khan the casket that had been the cause of so much trouble. It was locked, and the key was lost, he said. Pushing a great rock near the edge of the ravine to one side, Asaf Khan dropped the casket and his belt under the stone. Back dropped the boulder into its place, and Asaf Khan turned with a laugh of triumph.

"They shall have their labour in vain," he said savagely. "Would I could destroy the jewels utterly, but that may not be, there is no time. Even so, the jewels are safe, for will they look beneath every stone in this ravine! And now to make due preparation to receive our friends."

A noise at the end of the ravine caused him to look up, and now he knew it was indeed he

whom these men sought ; for not only were they men of the village, but before them stood the goldsmith.

They saw him even as he saw them, and the goldsmith shook his clenched fist.

" Robber and murderer ! " he shrieked. " No more shalt thou rob and murder, thou woman-slayer ! "

Now, this was a new thing to Asaf Khan, and he looked at the goldsmith in wonder. Had the woman slain herself after he left ? He thought not, for he had known women fight harder than she had fought. And yet the goldsmith called him woman-slayer.

" Liar ! " he shouted back. " Never has Asaf Khan slain woman, and he lies in his throat who says Asaf Khan has ! Know, ye men who come with this goldsmith, seeking me I know not for what, that I have slain no woman."

" Thou didst rob the goldsmith," called one of the men.

" Him I robbed, for first he robbed me ; but no woman have I slain."

The men looked at each other. It was even as they had thought, for by his voice they knew this man spoke the truth and all men knew the goldsmith for a liar. But there was the matter of the reward, and also of the two rings which had been taken from the hermit—especially these.

" Return with us to our village," called the man who had first spoken. " There shall the matter be inquired into ; and if thou art indeed

guiltless of this murder thou shalt go free. But thou must give up what of his thou hast taken, and also return the two rings thou didst take from the holy hermit of the hill, which was an evil deed."

Asaf Khan shook his head with a grim laugh. Evidently the woman was dead ; the goldsmith must have slain her and now sought to put the blame on him. Some one must suffer for the death of the woman, and who would accuse the goldsmith. The goldsmith was rich, a man of the village with relations within the village ; Asaf Khan was a stranger. Little chance would he have if they took him to the village.

"The prey does not walk into the tiger's jaws," he replied. "This will I do. What I have taken I will restore, and will pay a fine here and now ; but return to the village with thee I will not. Say, to this wilt thou agree ? "

Some of the men thought it a fair offer ; but the goldsmith shook his fist, screaming with rage and urging the men forward. The man must die, else might the relations of the woman ask questions.

And now had men thought, they must have known the Jew for what he was ; for in his fury he danced, thrusting forward his open hands on a level with his chin and screaming out curses and imprecations. Never should the murderer of his wife go free ! Not one piece of the reward would he give were the man let go his way ; but he would double it when the man lay dead ! The thought of the money they would

get prevailed with the men, and dismounting from their horses they advanced up the ravine.

" Get thee behind this rock," said Asaf Khan. " I will put yet one more boulder upon the heap, and then shalt thou see a fight which few men have seen—though mayhap thou wilt not live to tell of it."

Laying his revolver and knife on a rock beside him, Asaf Khan lifted a great boulder and placed it on the pile he had raised. A sound made him turn, and he sprang forward; but he was too late. As he turned, the boy dashed past him and sped down the ravine, taking with him Asaf Khan's revolver and knife.

Then was Asaf Khan's heart filled with a great rage and bitterness against the boy who betrayed him thus to his enemies. For now he was indeed helpless, and they could take him when they would. But he would that before he died he could grind under his heel the false face of the traitor who had betrayed him to death! What was it the boy called as he ran?

" Put up your guns and slay him not," cried the boy. " I have his weapons, and he can do naught to ye. Seize and bind him, and bring him to the village; for I also have something against this man, seeing that he has slain many men of my village and would have borne me to slavery. Slay him not. A warrior's death should not this man die, but the death of a dog, hanging by the neck for all men to see and take warning!"

Asaf Khan ground his teeth and a great oath burst from his lips. Oh! to have his fingers about this boy's neck for one short instant! The boy had deceived him throughout! A boy, and yet a very fiend in treachery!

Now the boy had reached the men, and they crowded round him with eager questions, asking if the man they would seize was indeed unarmed. He was! Then, now to take him. And they advanced in a body down the ravine.

But the goldsmith was no longer in front. These men would do his bidding and seize the man for the sake of the reward; he would stay where he was, for thus would he be safer than near the murderer.

And then, how it happened none could say, as the boy handed the revolver and knife to the man, the revolver went off. Whether the boy by accident had his finger upon the trigger, or whether the trigger caught in the man's sleeve none could say; but there was a report, and with a wild cry the goldsmith fell to the ground, a bullet in his brain.

Then was the confusion great, and all crowded round inquiring how this thing had come to pass. But the man who held the revolver could not say, save that it was an accident. He knew not even if the revolver exploded in his hand or in the boy's. The goldsmith was dead, of that there was no doubt, and the men were filled with dismay. What of the reward!

"The casket," quoth one. "The goldsmith promised to reward us if we took this man; we will take him back to the village for the

elders to try, and we will take the casket for our reward."

It was good, and they regretted not the death of the goldsmith. Their reward would now be greater than if he had lived. Leaving the goldsmith where he lay, they again advanced down the ravine.

With a stone in each hand Asaf Khan awaited their coming. Weaponless though he be, he still would not be taken without a struggle. He would injure these men ; if he could, he would slay some ; then would they in their anger slay him and he would die the death he coveted, the death of a warrior fighting to the last.

A stone in each hand, he awaited their coming ; and when they were still twenty paces distant, he hurled the stones. As a boy Asaf Khan had been a famous marksman among his young companions, and his hand had not lost its cunning nor the years robbed him of the aim that had brought down many a pigeon and pheasant in the days of old. Straight to the mark sped the first stone, striking a man on the shoulder and whirling him round, and as straight sped a second at a man's head. But the man ducked his head, and this stone missed its mark—for which the man gave thanks to Allah, for had it struck him it had surely dashed out his brains.

Yet other stones seized Asaf Khan, hurling them at the men as they made to advance, hurting many, and striking one or two senseless to the ground. Yet they would not fire. They were angered now, and because they were

angered would not do as he wished, knowing well why he cast the stones, that they might slay him and not take him bound to the village.

Seizing stones in turn, they cast them at Asaf Khan ; but because of the heap behind which he stood, the stones struck him not. Yet did he now find it more difficult to cast stones at them ; for to do so he must expose himself, and immediately twenty stones sped through the air. Then with a sudden rush some reached the other side of the heap behind which he sheltered, and these men Asaf Khan could not reach. Also, the stones near by were all used up, and to get more he must leave his shelter. He gnashed his teeth with fury. They would not kill him ; they would seize him and take him ingloriously to their village. Never! With his bare hands he would slay one, and then in their anger they would surely slay him.

Rushing from behind the heap of boulders, he seized a man. Another moment his hands would be about the man's neck and the man would be dead. With a savage growl he darted forth his hand for the death grip ; but others threw themselves upon him, bearing him to the ground, and the man was freed. Like a tiger at bay turned Asaf Khan upon his foes, tearing at faces, biting, kicking, striking out in mad fury. Once he got his finger into a man's mouth and would have torn the cheek open ; but the man bit him to the bone and with an oath Asaf Khan snatched out his finger. To and fro rolled the heap of fighting, struggling men. The veins on Asaf Khan's face stood

out like cords as he heaved and twisted and strove to throw off the men who cast themselves upon him. But he was one against many ; and presently he lay bound hand and foot, while those with whom he had fought looked ruefully to their wounds.

With many turbans bound they Asaf Khan, lest he work himself free and do more harm. Many had he wounded ; and they blessed the boy that he had taken away from the man his weapons, else surely had many of them been slain. With their turbans they bound him, binding both arms and legs, and then they searched his clothing for the casket.

But no casket did they find, and calling the boy, they asked him if he had seen aught of the jewels.

The boy shook his head. "He showed me no jewels," he replied. "Perchance he had none. It may be that the goldsmith lied in saying the man took his jewels."

But this the men would not believe. The goldsmith would not have offered so great a reward for the capture of one who had merely slain his wife. Indeed, they doubted if the man had slain the woman. The goldsmith had surely been robbed, and they urged the boy to think if he had seen the man hiding aught.

Still the boy shook his head. He had seen no jewels, nor had he seen the man hiding aught. If the man had in truth taken the goldsmith's jewels, he must have hidden them when the boy was not near. Perchance he hid them at the

hermit's cave, meaning to return for them some future day. And then Asaf Khan spoke.

He knew why the boy denied all knowledge of these jewels. When Asaf Khan was slain, then would the boy return and possess himself of the treasure. Sooner would he that the men of the village should have it than this traitor.

"The casket lies beneath a boulder," he said, and glared in savage triumph at the boy. "I hid it beneath a boulder, so that ye might not find it; and so return empty, ye and the goldsmith. With it also lies my belt in which are jewels and rings. These are mine. But these ye may also have if ye will promise me one thing I ask. Swear that not one single ring or jewel shall ye give this boy, then will I tell ye where they lie hid."

A moment sufficed for them to decide. Who was this boy that they should give him aught? True, he had helped them; but that was when he saw that they were many and must prevail. He had helped them to save his own life, perchance to gratify his own revenge; but none of the reward had been promised him by the goldsmith, and to none could he lay claim. They swore. On the Koran, and on the Holy Qaaba at Mecca they swore that the boy should have naught of this treasure, and then did Asaf Khan show them the boulder under which the casket and belt lay hid.

Naught said the boy; but there was a strange look in his eyes as he gazed at Asaf Khan, and once he laughed. Then again he fell silent,

nor spoke a word till the men had discovered the treasure and all were mounted and on their way to the village. Asaf Khan they seated upon his own horse, his arms bound behind him, and his feet bound together beneath the belly of the horse. The boy rode behind a man, and the body of the goldsmith was bound to the horse on which he had ridden forth.

The men tried to open the casket, but it was locked and there was no key. It was heavy, and something rattled within ; in the morning it would be opened before the elders, and the contents shared among those who had gone forth.

Then spake the boy, bidding the men remember that it was owing to him that none had died that day, and to this they agreed ; for indeed, had he not brought the man's weapons many would have died ere they overpowered or slew him. Then did the boy claim their promise that the men of his village should be allowed to judge this man. Of their village the man had slain but one, and that a woman ; of his village the man had slain men, and many. His village had the greater right to vengeance ; and to this also the men agreed. They thought he would then claim part of the reward, and to this they would not have agreed ; but he spoke no more and they rode in silence to the village, save for an occasional curse as one felt a sore place gained in the late fray.

It was a long ride, and to Asaf Khan a long torture. So this was the end of the great future to which he had looked forward—to be

hanged like a dog ! Oh for a minute's freedom to crush the life out of the devil's whelp who had betrayed him thus to a death of dishonour ! If looks could have slain, the boy had been dead long ere they reached the village ; but looks slay not, neither do curses, and presently Asaf Khan rode in gloomy silence, his eyes on his horse's neck

It was even when they reached the village ; and Asaf Khan looked long at the western sky. It was the last time he would see the sun set ; for on the morrow he would be confined in a room, and on the next day he would be dead. A man could ride to Akaru in one day if he pushed his horse, no doubt the boy himself would go, and the men of Akaru would ride all night to take vengeance upon one who had slain so many of their bravest and best. By morn they would arrive, and the trial would be short—if indeed there were a trial.

And he owed it all to this boy ; to the boy whom he had tended as a son, and whose future he had planned so that he should be a man and a warrior known. He a warrior ! And yet he might some day be a great man ; for are not the good things of this world oft to the cunning and crafty rather than to the brave ! Asaf Khan spat ; the thought of this traitor left a vile taste in his mouth.

To a strong room within the village took they Asaf Khan ; and there, after they had dragged him from his horse and again bound his legs, did they cast him in to spend the night. No windows had this room, and but one door ;

for it was a room in which they kept men who had offended till such time as the elders had decided what their punishment should be. Therefore did the men not examine it, for they knew it for a strong room from which the prisoner could not escape. But not so the boy.

Every wall did he tap, while the men stood by and laughed. Every inch of the floor did he stamp on as if he feared an underground passage. Many times did he open and close the door, examining the hinges and bolts. Even the roof did he scan ; and then he examined Asaf Khan's bonds. They were now of rope, and the boy tested each separate knot, while the men roared with laughter and Asaf Khan cursed the boy for the misbegotten son of a she ape with a swine for his father.

At last the boy was satisfied, and the door was closed and locked ; but when one would have taken the boy to his house for the night, the boy refused, declaring they had little to fear from this man ; he, all. Even if the man freed himself from the prison that night, he would not harm them, rather would he seek to escape from the village and never come anigh it again ; but the boy he would hunt throughout his life till he found and slew him.

Naught could they say that could move him. That door would he guard all night ; nor would he sleep till day came and men were moving in the village. The man was secure, and secure he should remain till the avengers came. Asaf Khan ground his teeth, and even the men looked grave, for never had they seen such hate

in a boy, such a wish, such a determination to slay.

At last they left, giving him the key of the cell, for who would guard the prisoner as this boy would? And though they would have had a man stay with him and bear him company in his loneliness, the boy laughed in scorn.

He wanted no company; his thoughts would be company enough. Also the spirits of those of his village whom this man had slain would bear him company. But he begged them that they would leave with him the man's horse. The man loved his horse; it would be torture to him to hear it outside, stamping and snorting, while he lay bound within, never more upon its back to scour in freedom across the plain; and though again the men looked grave, for hate such as this they had never met, not even in men, to this also they agreed, and left with him the man's horse which he tied to the staple of the door. Then they departed, every man to his house, leaving this strange boy to his dreadful watch.

Propping his back against the door, the boy sat and stared before him, speaking no word to those who, hearing the tale, came to see the place where the murderer was confined, and also to see the boy with the hatred of a man. Some questioned him; but he answered them not, and presently they left. As the hour grew later, fewer came, and then none. Gradually the village sank to sleep, till only the watchmen's calls disturbed the silence of the night.

Slowly the hours wore on. At time the watchman's call would pass from tower to tower, or a lonely wolf howl without the village wall. Two owls perched on the roof of a neighbouring house and made night hideous with their screeching chatter till the boy drove them away with a stone.

Midnight came and passed, and then the boy did a strange thing. Taking the key of the room from his waistbelt, he softly turned it in the lock on the door. Still more gently did he lift the latch and push the door ajar. Like a shadow he slipped through the opening, and Asaf Khan leapt upon him.

For Asaf Khan had heard the key in the lock and the chain lifted, and knew what was in the boy's mind. So great was this boy's hatred towards the slayer of the men of his village that he could not wait till the morrow; with his own hands would he slay the prisoner. With a supreme effort Asaf Khan bent back on his heels, pushing against the wall with all his might, till at last he stood erect. He could not move; but he was near the door, and as the boy entered Asaf Khan threw himself forward, felling the boy to the ground and falling upon him.

His hands were tied; but he had teeth, and more than once had he used those teeth for other purpose than eating. With lips drawn back in an animal snarl he sought eagerly the boy's throat to tear it out. But it was not to be, his mouth was too low. But if he could not slay the boy, he could mark him so that all his

life he would remember Asaf Khan. If Asaf Khan must die the death of a dog, like a dog he would punish his betrayer ; and seizing the boy's arm in his teeth, he began to worry him, shaking his head as a dog worries a cat or a jackal, striving to tear the piece from the boy's arm.

He would have some little revenge. The boy would scream in his agony, and he would laugh ; how he would laugh ! The more the boy screamed, the more would he laugh.

But the boy did not scream. One short, sharp cry he gave, and then was silent, save that he groaned. And groan he well might, for he was suffering torture that would have wrung groans from a strong man. But he did not scream as Asaf Khan had hoped. Why ? He was speaking. Through his clenched teeth he spoke, as if he strove to bite back the scream of agony even while he spoke.

" For Allah's sake ! I can bear no more ! I must scream, and then they will come. For Allah's sake forbear, and hear me."

" I would it were thy throat ! Thou false traitor ! Thou spawn of hell ! Never will I desist till I tear the piece from thine arm ! "

" For Allah's sake ! " moaned the boy. " Thou knowest not the truth. It was to free thee I came within. Ah ! This agony ! It is more than I can bear ! Desist, or I must scream, I can bear no more ! "

To free him ? Asaf Khan released the mouthful of bruised flesh ; but he kept his teeth apart and his lips drawn back.

"Speak," he growled. "To free me, thou sayest?"

"To free thee," sighed the boy. "But for a while I cannot. I—" and he was silent.

Why was he silent? Asaf Khan felt about with his mouth, slowly drawing himself closer to the boy's throat. The boy made no movement. He must have known what Asaf Khan meant to do, yet he moved not. And then Asaf Khan knew that the boy must have fainted. Still he worked upward, till at last his mouth was near the boy's throat. Thus he would lie till the boy recovered his senses, and then he would tear out his lying throat.

Presently the boy moaned and stirred. Asaf Khan moved not, he waited. Then the boy spoke.

"Ill hast thou done, O Asaf Khan," he said. "Ever dost thou act in haste, nor think what thou would'st do. I came in here to free thee, and lo! thou would'st have slain me. Even now I feel thy breath upon my throat and know what is thine intent. In truth I have not played thee false. Turn but a little that I may feel thy wrists, and I will untie thy bonds."

Could it be true? Had he so grievously wronged the boy, or would the boy play another trick upon him? "Untie the knots with thy fingers," he said, "Touch them not with thy knife!" It would be an easy matter for the boy to drive the knife into his back.

"I have no knife, it is without. Wilt never believe!" and the boy moved impatiently. "Let me unloose thy bonds; then canst thou slay me and go thy way."

Even then would not Asaf Khan believe ; but he moved so that the boy's fingers could reach the knots, and in a few minutes he was free. It was not long ere his legs were also free, and he rose to his feet.

The boy also rose ; and though he clenched his teeth, he could not entirely suppress the groan that rose to his lips. Asaf Khan heard the groan, and clenched his teeth also. If he had indeed wronged the boy !

" Thy plan ? " he said briefly.

" Go thou to the gate and there hide thyself," said the boy wearily, for the pain made him weak and faint. " At dawn will I come to the gate and call to the watchman that I ride forth to bring the men of my village. When I open the gate, slip thou through with me, and once in the open, thou art safe. They will not pursue thee again, for the goldsmith cannot urge them on, and they have the hermit's two rings. Haste thee," and with one hand he pushed Asaf Khan towards the open door. " Haste thee, for I must be at my post lest any pass and mark the open door."

Then was Asaf Khan filled with a great shame. So great was the shame he felt, that though he tried to thank the boy, he could not speak a word. Indeed, he had little time to speak ; for the boy pushed him from the door, urging him not to stay there, where some might come to see if the boy kept good watch, and with a groan Asaf Khan departed.

That wait till dawn was an eternity of torture to Asaf Khan ; and when in after years

he looked back upon that night, he smiled to think how soft had been his heart in those days. It was not torture of the body; that Asaf Khan could have borne better; it was torture of the mind; and when he thought of how he had treated the boy who came to release him, how grievously he had hurt him, in what agony the boy must now be, almost he felt inclined to return to his prison.

But why had the boy disarmed him in the ravine? This he could not understand. The boy had disarmed him, so that he was delivered up helpless into the hands of his foes, and now the boy saved him from those very foes.

At last the first, grey streaks of dawn stole across the eastern sky, and with the dawn came the boy, the tread of his horse echoing down the silent street.

"Who comes?" from the ever wakeful watchman.

"It is I. I go to bring the avengers to slay the one who killed so many of my village."

The watchman had heard of this terrible boy the previous evening. So eager was this boy for revenge, that with the earliest dawn he would be away to bring his friends!

"Peace be with thee," said the watchman solemnly. "Thou art in truth a boy with a heart harder than a millstone. Thanks be to Allah there be not many boys like thee, else would all men be devils! I pray we never meet when thou art a man. Unhook the chain and go thy way."

With a quick motion the boy beckoned Asaf

Khan to him, and while the man crouched beneath the belly of the horse, the boy leaned forward and lifted the chain. It fell with a clang ; and pulling open the gate, the boy passed through, the watchman above little knowing of the man who crouched beneath the horse's belly.

For a few minutes they went thus ; and then Asaf Khan leaped upon the horse behind the boy, and away they went into the grey light of the morning, the breath of their steed rising like steam on the fresh, sharp air of dawn.

They spoke little. In a while they changed seats, the boy riding behind, and Asaf Khan asked the boy whither they should go, in case the boy had made further plans. But the boy shrugged his shoulders as though it mattered little, and Asaf Khan let the horse have its head to take them where it listed. But later, when the sun rose and Asaf Khan would have turned the horse's head, the boy bade him keep on this course, as it would lead them to the ravine.

" They will not follow us," he said. " They know, for I heard them say so, that it was the goldsmith who slew his wife ; and they will know also when the watchman speaks and I return not, that I have naught to avenge ; wherefore, then, should they again seek to capture thee, seeing also that the goldsmith is now dead and cannot urge them on. They have thy belt, also the casket of the goldsmith. It will be enough, and they will not again molest thee."

For three hours they rode, and then the boy suddenly sank forward, and had Asaf Khan not seized him he would have fallen to the ground. He had fainted ; and only then since the ride began did Asaf Khan remember what the boy must be suffering.

Lifting the boy gently to the ground, Asaf Khan rolled up the sleeve of the injured arm. The sight made him, strong man though he was, feel sick ; for it was as if some wild beast had mauled the boy's arm. And yet the boy had borne up all that night—how many times had he fainted while he sat before the door, Asaf Khan wondered—and in the morning he had helped Asaf Khan to leave the village, afterwards riding thus far without a sign to betray the agony he must have been suffering. Truly this boy had a great heart and would some day be a famous warrior !

The boy's eyes opened presently ; and now came a trial of wills. Asaf Khan would have stayed there. The boy must rest, he said, afterwards they could go on. But the boy would have none of it. He needed no rest. When they reached the ravine he would rest, not before. When Asaf Khan mentioned his arm, he snatched down the sleeve.

" My arm is naught to thee," he said angrily. " I feel no pain, so why should we wait here ? I will not wait here ! Let me ride on thy horse, or I will walk ; for go to the ravine I will ! "

To obstinacy such as this there could be no reply, so Asaf Khan helped the boy again on the horse, though he himself walked beside, ready

to seize the boy if he should again faint ; and so they journeyed on in silence till they reached the hill in which lay the ravine.

Presently the boy reined in the horse.

" Go thou to the right," he said, " and look in those bushes."

A sharp retort rose to Asaf Khan's lips, for he was one who brooked orders from none ; but perchance it was pain that made the boy speak thus, and he bit back the words. In silence he went to where the boy pointed, and there, in the midst of the bushes, lay a knife, his own knife which he had thought he should never see again.

" I threw it there," said the boy. " When thy revolver fired of itself "—he glanced sharply at Asaf Khan—" and the goldsmith fell dead, all men ran to look. Then while no one saw did I cast thy knife so far that it fell in these bushes."

Asaf Khan had been wondering what he should do, unarmed, and without the means to procure arms. Now, thanks to the wit of the boy he had not only his horse, he had his knife also. His revolver was gone past recall ; but as few in those parts carry other firearms than a gun, he was almost as well armed as any he would meet. For the knife is the weapon of the Border. Every man carries one ; and though he may have also sword, pistol or gun, it is on his tried and faithful friend his knife that he relies to keep him from harm. The Pathan loves a surprise ; what use a gun or sword when the enemy is at handgrip ?

"Thanks to thee, O magician, I have my horse and my knife," he said with grim humour. "Now conjure me wealth, else must the horse and knife go to buy us food. Or shall we seek a robber band?"

And indeed, it was not all humour. At the village mosques they could procure a little food, but food is not all. They had no rugs to wrap them in at night; for Asaf Khan's had not been thrown with him into the room, and though the boy had sat upon his own outside the door, he had not taken it with him when he mounted the horse, lest the watchman wonder why one in haste should burden his horse thus. Work they could not get, each man on the Border does his own work with the help perchance of slaves from India. They could hire their services to caravans or to some great man; but against this Asaf Khan's proud spirit rebelled.

They had by this time come to the entrance to the ravine, and reining in the horse, the boy glanced around. Presently he found what he sought, and pointed with outstretched hand to a stone.

"Remove yon stone," he said, "and thou shalt have wealth likewise."

It was even as the boy said. Beneath the stone lay rings and jewels, the rings and jewels that had been in the casket Asaf Khan had taken from beneath the goldsmith's bed. But how came they here! And then Asaf Khan remembered how the boy had gone to the entrance of the ravine and returned. It was then he emptied the casket. He must have then

filled it with stones and thrown away the key, and when Asaf Khan asked him, the boy said it was so.

Slipping from the horse, the boy entered the ravine, and Asaf Khan followed in silence. He was crafty ; but this boy had proved his master in guile and he was content to follow where the boy led. But still he could not understand why the boy should have pretended to betray him ; for true it is that, cunning in invention as a man may be, it is not given him always to read the mind of another. Reaching the heap of rocks, he took the boy by the injured arm.

" Naught will I do and not a step from here will I go till I have dressed thine arm and learnt from thee the meaning of all this."

" Is there aught to tell ? Dress my arm, and we will rest here a space ere we go to find a village where we may eat."

The wound was a gruesome sight ; but Asaf Khan washed and bound it and had no doubt that in a few days it would be well ; for the bite of one who lives as Asaf Khan lived is not poisonous as is the bite of civilised man. His food was plain and simple, his blood pure, and there was no coating of poison on his teeth as is found on the teeth of civilised man, to poison the wound the teeth have made.

When Asaf Khan had finished, the boy lay back for a time, pale and exhausted. " Methinks it is not I alone who repay in strange fashion a kindness done," he said.

" Now tell me the rest," said Asaf Khan.

"What would'st thou have done? Fought to the death!"

"And killed as many as I could before I died."

"Still, thou would'st now be dead. And how had these men wronged thee? They sought not to slay, they would have taken thee to the village for fair trial."

"Fair trial!" and Asaf Khan laughed. "The goldsmith wronged me. I took his gold, but I slew not the woman."

"And he is dead. Thou art a warrior, O Asaf Khan, and without doubt the bravest man on the Border. Craft also hast thou, and cunning; but before all thou art a warrior. Given time, thou canst devise a plan; but when knives flash and gun barrels glisten, then is thy craft lost in the lust of battle. And so was it in this ravine. What would it have profited thee to slay those men? Had I reasoned with thee, naught would'st thou have heeded; perchance me, also, thou would'st have slain; and therefore I did what I did.

"Taking thy weapons, I fled to those men, that being unarmed thou could'st slay none and so their anger be kindled not against thee. Then told I the tale of the men of my village, claiming thee for them, theirs being the greater injury; and they heeded my words as I knew they would. Thus thou art not dead this day, but alive, with thy horse, thy knife and thy jewels. None will pursue, for they have the jewels which were in thy belt, and they have naught against thee—and the goldsmith is

dead. Now I would sleep, for I slept not last night ; do thou likewise."

Naught replied Asaf Khan ; but now all things were clear. All save one—died the goldsmith by accident, or of purpose ? But on this point he questioned not the boy ; sufficient was it that the goldsmith was dead. Let the boy keep his secret—if secret there were.

CHAPTER V

HOW THE HOLY PIR TOOK A BLESSING TO ALL LANDS

AND now Asaf Khan bethought him of food, for they had eaten naught since the previous day; and though pain had dulled the boy's hunger for a time, when he had slept and rested he would want food. A little flour Asaf Khan had in a bag tied to his saddle, but he had no vessel in which to mix the dough, nor the flat, iron plate on which to cook it.

But these are small matters to a Pathan. With his knife he dug a hole in the ground, and built stones above it, covering the whole with earth, leaving a small opening above and a larger one in front. Cutting dry brushwood he thrust it into the primitive oven he had thus made, placing a few round stones among the sticks, and with his tinder and flint he lit the fire.

While the fire burnt and heated the oven, he went to a small stream that flowed half a mile

from the ravine, and there on a flat stone made his dough, which he brought back to the ravine on the stone on which he had kneaded it. The fire was now burnt down to embers, so with a crooked stick he raked out the ashes and drew out the hot stones he had placed among the brushwood. Wrapping each stone in a coating of dough, he replaced them in the oven, placing a large flat stone to close the mouth. The bread was soon cooked, and Asaf Khan shook the boy.

"Wake up and eat. We must be on our journey, or night will come upon us ere we reach shelter."

The boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then the smell of the freshly baked bread came to his nostrils, and he looked around in surprise.

"It is now thou who art the magician. Naught have we to cook, and naught to cook with, yet do I smell fresh bread."

"We had flour," replied Asaf Khan, "and I cooked it as I learnt to do in the land of the Maris of Beluchistan. Rise and eat, for we must be on our way."

The food, though scanty, served their need; and after they had washed their hands they ate, going to the stream to eat, so that they could also drink. The horse was again saddled, and they set off.

The boy's arm gave him little pain unless he tried to use it. No muscle had been touched, and though a sudden movement made him wince, there was no need to put his arm in a sling. Asaf Khan again dressed the wound

at the stream, and knew it would soon be well if the boy could only rest.

But to rest they must first find a village. At a hamlet Asaf Khan did not wish to stay. The mussafir khana (travellers' resthouse) is but a rude shelter ; and though Asaf Khan pampered not his body, nor yearned over much after luxuries, he yet preferred comfort to discomfort, cleanliness to dirt ; and that they would meet both discomfort and dirt at a hamlet mussafir khana he knew well.

Also the people of a hamlet are few, and curious to know the business of every stranger who comes ; for there is no curiosity like the curiosity of the dwellers in small places, in whatever country that small place may be. But in a large village few would inquire his business ; for many come and go, and it is no new thing to see a stranger in the mussafir khana or the village street.

In a large village, too, he could sell one of his rings ; and this he must do soon, for till he had money he could buy no food. To one of the large villages, therefore, must they go ; and never having been through that land before, he knew not where the large villages lay nor how far he must travel ere they reached one ; and so they must start early and push on lest they fail to reach one that night.

For an hour they journeyed on. Night was drawing nigh, and still no village. Nor did they meet on the road any men from whom they could ask the way ; for the harvest was in, and all were busy beating the grain from the chaff.

Then, welcome to their eyes came the sight of a mosque by the roadside. Here they could rest the night, and mayhap procure food; for to many of these wayside mosques is money given by men who would gain favour in the sight of heaven for deeds of charity, or who offered a thanksgiving for mercies received; and with this money were fed such as came hungry, having lost their all by robbers, or by storm or flood.

The mullah of the mosque greeted them, a grave, sober looking man with a grizzled beard. Dirty he was, yet not so dirty as most of his tribe, though his clothes could not have been washed for many days, and he might, from his looks, have performed his ablutions with sand, as is allowed when water is scarce. For is it not written that, if a man find not water, then may he rub pure sand, and bathe his face and hands with it?

Giving them greeting, the mullah asked of them their business and means; and when he heard that they were travellers who had been robbed by the way and had not the wherewithal to feed them till they should reach their village, he made them welcome and brought out flour and provisions, bidding them cook and eat, and afterwards give thanks to Allah and to the good men who of their charity had fed them this day.

The mosque was not large; but it was an old one, and though now falling to ruin, must in its time have been a place of note and of great beauty. Still could traces be seen of the coat-

ing of coloured plaster that had once adorned and beautified the walls, and the platform before the mosque still contained a marble basin in which the Faithful had been wont to perform their ablutions. But alas! the marble was now yellow with age and cracked, so that it no longer held water, and those who came to worship had to perform their ablutions with water from a few earthen pots placed for that purpose.

Of flat bricks was the mosque built, bricks held together by mortar that the passage of years had turned to stone. The roof in the centre was surmounted by a dome, and at the two sides were minarets, though these minarets were small ones, too small to be ascended, and were erected for ornament alone, the call to prayer being given from the platform before the mosque.

Trees overhung the building, casting a pleasant shade, and to the side was one, a plane of great size, its age to be counted in centuries. Enclosing the mosque was a ruined wall which had once been high, but which served not now even to keep out stray cattle; and behind the mosque, within the wall, was a sacred shrine, a grave quite ten feet in length, with a white headstone. A verse from the Koran was painted on the headstone, and beneath the writing was a niche for a lamp.

Without the wall and behind the shrine was an ancient graveyard, ancient in that it contained graves of which the stones erected at head and feet were worn with the wind and

rain of many years ; but that the graveyard was still used, was attested by fresh graves, some of which had not yet received their headstones.

Against the mosque stood a small hut in which dwelt the mullah ; and beside the hut were the rude, mud fireplaces on which the traveller could cook his food. Near by was a shed in which the traveller could rest for the night ; but a glance within sufficed, and Asaf Khan elected to pass the night under the plane.

The simple meal was soon cooked and eaten ; and as they sat and rested before they slept, Asaf Khan asked the mullah who the good men were who of their charity had given them food that night, as he wished to remember them when he prayed.

This was good enough reason for the mullah ; but Asaf Khan asked the question wishing to know what rich men dwelt near the mosque ; it might be that he could sell a ring to one, and thus have money for his daily needs.

The reply of the mullah was not such as he had hoped. Not by a few men was the money given to the mosque, but by many, each giving a little according to his means. For the shrine was a holy one ; and also they gave the money as a thank-offering ; though of the reason for this thank-offering he would not speak, saying that it concerned himself. When pressed for this reason he fell silent, and presently bade Asaf Khan hold his peace—which remark pleased Asaf Khan not at all, and sent him cursing under his breath to seek a soft place

under the plane. The boy slept on the platform, and the mullah retired to his hut.

Though twice during the night did the mullah wake them at the stated times for prayer, Asaf Khan and the boy rose early ; for they had no bedding, nor were their beds soft. Also, if the mullah gave them food it was well, otherwise they must seek it elsewhere and perchance at a distance. They sat on the edge of the platform before the mosque waiting for the mullah to awake ; and as they waited there came a man who would also see the mullah when he opened the door of his hut. The man came from a hamlet near by where he was staying, being a stranger in that land, and to Asaf Khan he told a strange tale of this mullah.

No ordinary mullah was this. A Holy Pir was he, a most Holy Pir. Above all Pirs was he holy, and because of his holiness, the land where he dwelt prospered exceeding well. The cattle were fat and gave much milk, the harvest never failed for want of rain, and good fortune was the lot of all who dwelt in that land. And the people were thankful and gave much money to the mosque, that poor travellers might be fed—and this Asaf Khan knew to be the reason which the good man's modesty forbade him to disclose.

Asaf Khan thought that the three springs which burst from the mountains behind, giving water to the fields and flowing down the valley as a stream might have something to do with the fat cattle and rich harvests ; but he said nothing, and the man continued.

Now, one day it came into the mind of this Holy Pir that Allah sent his blessings alike to all, and kept them not for one people alone. For his sake had Allah sent all good things to this people, for his sake forasmuch as he repeated the holy names of Allah from the time his eyes unclosed in the morning till they again closed at night, ceasing not even while he ate, but mingling the names with the food he chewed. Even while he spoke with others, in his mind he repeated the holy names. Because of his holiness had Allah sent his blessing to this people ; and though to others he also sent his blessing, this people he blessed above all others for that with them dwelt the holy man whom he loved.

But this should not be. All should receive alike. Yet while he stayed with these people, for his sake would they receive more than others. If he removed to another place, then would that place receive the blessings now showered upon this land. Therefore in no place must he dwell long ; he must travel, staying but a short time in each place, so should the blessings of a bountiful and merciful Allah be shared by all alike. Calling to him the chief men of that land, he made known to them what was in his mind.

Then was the voice of the people raised in weeping and lamentation, for with the Holy Pir would depart their great good furtune ; and falling at his feet in deep affliction they begged him not to leave them, promising to erect in his

honour a shrine greater and more glorious than any in the land.

But the Holy Pir heeded not their prayers and entreaties. He would do as he had said, for he knew that in so doing he did right and that his action would be pleasing to Allah, who was the father of all, not of a few ; and he let it be known that at the change of the moon he would leave his present abode and seek a dwelling elsewhere.

Then came men from far and wide, begging the Holy Pir that in their land he would take up his abode. For many years had their harvests been scanty, their kine lean and dry ; if he would but come and dwell with them a space, the blessing which he brought with him would descend upon their flocks and herds, their fields and themselves. From all the country round they came, some bringing with them gifts, and they crowded round the hut of the Holy Pir with clamorous prayers, till the holy man was fain to bolt his door against them and close his ears with his hands.

But when many want what only one can have, there is strife ; and so was it now. Even though the Holy Pir would in turn visit each, each would have him come first to dwell in his land. The Pir was an old man, beloved of Allah ; Allah might take him to himself at any time, what then of the places wherein the Holy Pir had not dwelt ? Therefore did each want the holy man to dwell first in his land. Quarrels arose, words of anger were spoken, and on the day Asaf Khan came three men had been slain.

Then was the Holy Pir wroth with these men, and he drove them from him, vowing in his wrath that never would he dwell in the land of men who for their wickedness deserved the curses of Allah rather than his blessings. He would stay in this land, and not leave it. These men could go to their land and give thanks that he called not down Allah's curses upon them for their evil deeds.

Sore dismayed were the men, and bitterly did they repent them of the evil they had done, begging the Holy Pir to forgive them even as Allah forgives those who sincerely repent of their sins ; for in the Holy Book it is written that to those who have done evil in ignorance then afterwards have repented and amended their ways, verily the Lord is in the end right gracious, merciful.

It was in the nature of man to strive, and they were but men. If the Holy Pir would come to their land, he could teach them to live in brotherly love one with another, so that there should be no more strife.

But to all their pleadings the Holy Pir turned a deaf ear. He forgave them, for thus it is enjoined in the Holy Book ; but go with them to their land he would not. Here he would live and die, and no tears or entreaties should move him.

At last the people left, repairing to the neighbouring hamlets for the night ; but yet did they not give up hope that the Holy Pir might change his mind. When the sun rose they would again return to the mosque, if haply the Holy Pir might relent.

Asaf Khan thought this a great to do about a small matter. Had his land been near, and had he wanted the Pir so that blessings should fall upon his land, he would some dark night have bound the Pir and taken him to his land whether the Pir wished to go or not.

But this business of Pirs and blessings had naught to do with him ; and he talked with the man on other matters, especially asking him in which direction lay the nearest large village, till the door of the hut opened and the Pir came forth.

" Salaam o aliekaum," they gave each other greeting, and then the man delivered his message.

" The men have taken counsel with each other, O Holy One, and their heads are bowed down with woe, for thine anger is great against them for what they have done. Of thy graciousness hast thou granted them forgiveness ; but when they return to their homes, what message will they take ? Surely the men of their land will slay them when they know that for the evil they have done their lands and their peoples must suffer ! Of thy mercy hear them once again ; and even if thou goest not with them, at least give them a comforting message to take to their homes."

The mullah gazed sternly in silence before him for a space. His heart inclined to mercy always, and in the watches of the night he had wondered if indeed he had been too harsh with these men.

" They be men of wicked passions," he replied,

" and with such do not men of holy life consort. Yet there be others in their land whose hearts may not incline to evil. To Allah are these known ; for in the Holy Book it is written that he knoweth the unseen and the seen ; he, the Mighty, the Merciful. Therefore is it in my heart to be merciful to these men and to go with them. But I make no promise. Tell them to come hither at the hour of mid-day prayer, and then will I give them mine answer."

With a low obeisance the man departed, and the Pir turned with a sigh to Asaf Khan. "Thus is it in this world. Not for the evil they have worked do these men repent them, but because that which they have done will bring them misfortune and sorrow."

Asaf Khan nodded in perfect agreement. The Holy Pir was quite right. He himself only repented of those deeds which brought evil upon himself, and he smiled in his beard. But he must not disclose his thought, lest the Pir be angered ; he must speak the holy man fair, else might they not be given another meal. The man had told him that the nearest village lay four hours' journey away, and he would not that he should travel empty if he could get a meal. Also he would like to hear the end of this business of the Pir who would, and then would not ; and of the men who would that he should.

But this last might not be. The Pir had called the men for noon, and even though they now received food, by noon he must be on his

way lest he reach the village to which he would go after the gates were closed, and be denied admittance.

Great therefore was his pleasure when the Pir told him that at this mosque it was not as at others. At other mosques a man might get one meal in the day, no more ; he must then go his way ; but here a traveller might stay as long as he wished, if the Pir thought he were in truth a traveller and indeed had no food or the wherewithal to purchase food. He and the boy could stay another day, said the Pir ; and as Asaf Khan wished greatly to see the outcome of this business of the Pir and the men, he thanked the Holy One for his kindness, saying it was not for food he hungered, but for the words of wisdom and grace that fell from the Holy One's lips ; for Asaf Khan had a tongue that could please all men—also deceive or anger them.

He cooked the food the Pir gave them, and sat beneath the shade of the plane while the boy cleaned the cooking pots, swept the Holy Pir's house, the mosque and the platform, and then sat listening while the Holy Pir repeated aloud, as he never ceased to repeat inwardly, the holy names of Allah.

At noon the men came, a great company, and stood below. With one voice they greeted the Holy Pir, and then stood in silence awaiting his will.

The Pir rose from the steps of the mosque where he had been seated, and came to the edge of the platform, crying aloud as he came

the holy names ; then, still repeating them in his mind, he spake to the people.

" Ye have done wrong," he said. " Yet all did not this deed of evil, and all should not be punished for what some have done ; therefore have I pondered well in my mind if I should not give ear to your request, and even take to your villages the blessings of Allah. But this first ye must do. Let those men who did this evil stand forth and confess before all men their fault and their sorrow for that fault. Let them do this, and then may I come with ye to your villages."

With cries of joy the people thrust before them four men, their hands bound behind their backs, and halters round their necks.

" Behold, O Holy One," they cried, " these be the men who did evil. At dawn we bound, and would have slain them ; but we held our hands that before thee might justice be done upon these wicked men. Now shall we hang them to yonder tree as a warning to evil doers ! "

But the holy man held up his hands in horror. " Nay ! Do not this evil ! For evil it is, even as that which was done before. Release these men, and let them confess their faults before all men ; but harm them not, for that is to do more evil."

And so the men were released ; and standing before all men, they confessed that they had sinned grievously, and repented them of their sin.

Now the throng would have the answer of

the Holy Pir; but for a space he stood in thought. He would go with these men, but how go so that there should not again be strife? And at last he spake, telling them what was in his mind.

Though now they repented them of their sin and would not strive, letting him go with whom he would, when he left the place to which he chose first to go there might again be strife even as at this time. For sins, and the repentance of sins, are soon forgotten when men would again have that for which they had sinned. Again Asaf Khan agreed. He repented him of what he had done in the goldsmith's house —but he would he could find another goldsmith with a fair wife.

The men, also, agreed that this might well be, and took counsel among themselves how it might be done without strife. But even while they spoke their anger grew; and again would there have been strife had not the Holy Pir withdrawn to his hut and closed the door.

Then came the men to their senses; and they ceased their strife, lest the Holy Pir again change his mind and go with none. For long they talked. Some would this, and some would that, but to no one thing would all agree; and it looked that with none might the Holy Pir go, for all would have him go with them.

Then spake Asaf Khan. Being a stranger, they might heed his words.

"Let Allah decide," quoth he, "for verily he is able to send down a sign. Let the Holy One take in his hand thin sticks, one for every

land to which ye would have him go, and let there be one stick longer than the rest. Then let each man draw a stick, and whosoever's hand Allah guideth to the longer stick, with him shall the Holy One go. Thus shall Allah decide."

With one accord did the men agree ; for thus would Allah show his will, and who so impious as to question the will of Allah ?

But now would not the Holy Pir come forth from his room, answering not when they knocked at his door, and the men turned to Asaf Khan in dismay.

" What now, stranger ? The Holy One heedeth not our knocking, for he is angered that we again strove. Perchance he will heed thee, a stranger. We will remove us from the platform : knock thou at the door and tell him that we will strive no more, but will leave the decision with Allah."

Then they left the platform, every man, and stood below ; and Asaf Khan knocked softly at the door, telling the Holy Pir in a gentle voice that the strife was o'er ere it began, and that the men would leave Allah to decide with whom the Holy One should first dwell.

The Pir hearkened to Asaf Khan ; and when he had peeped through the door and had seen that all men had indeed left the platform, he came forth. At first he was angered ; but when he heard what they would do, how they would leave the decision with Allah, his anger was appeased.

It was good : let Allah decide ; and he bade

the boy bring him twelve sticks, for from twelve separate places came these men. The sticks must be of a thickness and of a length. He himself would break half a thumb's length off all save one, so that only he should know which stick was the longer, not even the boy.

So was it done. The boy gathered twelve sticks, all of a thickness, breaking them so that they should be also one length, and brought them to the Holy Pir. Many would have helped the boy, choosing sticks and handing them to him—after making secret marks upon them—but the boy, guessing what was in their mind, would have none of these sticks.

Then did the Holy Pir, turning his back so that none should see, with his knife cut all the sticks of one size; and then he cut eleven of the sticks an inch shorter than the twelfth. Holding the sticks between the palms of his hands so that only the ends showed, he came to the edge of the platform and bade the men draw, one man from each of the twelve places. One by one must they come, and having drawn, must stand beside him. When all had drawn, then would it be known who had drawn the longer stick.

Then stepped twelve men forward to the platform, and one by one drew the sticks from the hands of the Holy Pir; and Asaf Khan laughed. Short and sharp he laughed; but when the Holy Pir frowned upon him and asked him why he laughed, he would not say.

The men drew the sticks; and then, taking them again from the men, one by one as he had

given them, the Pir, as he took them, measured one stick with the others. All the sticks were of different lengths! No one had drawn the longer stick, for there was no longer stick! For three, longer than the rest, were of a size!

In stupefied amaze the people stared at each other; and the Holy Pir, dropping the sticks from hands from which all strength had departed, gazed open-mouthed upon the throng.

Again Asaf Khan laughed. Short and sharp was his laugh, like the yelp of a wolf; for what had amazed the people and the Holy Pir was no mystery to him. It had been in his mind what he would do were he one to draw, and he watched the men closely as the Pir prepared the sticks. Then did they even as he would have done in like case. Each took a stick which he had gathered, and secretly trimmed the ends with a knife. They noted the size the boy broke the sticks, and made their sticks, as well as they could guess, the same length.

In great anger did the Holy Pir turn upon Asaf Khan and bid him cease his unseemly mirth. Was it a matter for laughter that Allah had decided that with none of these men should he go, but should remain in the land where he had so long dwelt! for thus did the Holy Pir interpret the miracle.

Then did the twelve men look blank; and Asaf Khan chuckled in great amusement at the look of dismay written across their faces. But the Holy Pir's wrath was kindled against him; he must say why he laughed.

"I laugh not at the miracle, O Holy One," he said, "I laugh at these foolish men. Not one of those sticks at thy feet was drawn from thy hand ; they were prepared by these men so that each should draw the longest stick, each preparing his stick secretly, unknown to thee and to the others."

Great was the commotion and loud the outcry that followed Asaf Khan's words, each accusing the rest and denying that the man of his party had done this evil, each knowing that the other lied ; and exceeding great was the wrath of the Holy Pir against these wicked men who would have tampered with the decrees of Allah, making what was but a trick appear his will. With furious words he bade them go, and never come near the mosque again. Of them it was written in the Book that chastisement awaited them in this present life, and more grievous should be the chastisement in the next ; and none should screen them from Allah !

Rushing into his hut, the Holy Pir bolted the door from within.

Then was the anger of the men kindled, one against the other, so that presently knives were drawn, and men slain. Four men were slain, and then did they draw apart. This was foolishness. It was for doing thus that the wrath of the Holy Pir was first kindled against them, and now again had they done evil. The devil may have changed the sticks, but who slew these men ? Now indeed would the Holy Pir never forgive, nor would aught they could say move him to accompany them to their homes.

And the men took counsel with one another, what they should do, and what tell their people when they returned without the Holy Pir, with the dread news, moreover, that never would the Holy One visit their land to bring the blessing of Allah upon it. Some would have taken him by force ; but this could not be, for none would let another take him. Must they then return empty ?

Then spake Asaf Khan. This business was much to his mind ; for ever did he love to see knives flash and men fight, even if he himself took no part in the fight. It seemed as if these men would now go their way ; and he would not that the matter should end yet. The hour was too late for him to now go his way to the village ; he must spend this night at the mosque, and he would have further amusement to while away the time.

First he looked round to see if any seemed dwellers of that part, but all were girded as if they travelled. Yet he would make sure, and he asked if all who were there came from afar, or if any men of that land were among them. They were all from afar ; for the men of the land were sad at heart, and sat in their homes bewailing the loss of their Holy Pir and the blessings that would go with him. Then spake Asaf Khan.

" Why strive ye thus among yourselves ? " he said. " Ye but slay each other, and naught do ye gain. Listen then to me who have no stake in this matter, and if my words please ye, then do as I bid."

Now, some were angered that Asaf Khan had laughed at them for the matter of the sticks and had disclosed their wickedness to the Holy Pir, and they would not hearken; but others said it would be good to listen. As the man said; he had naught to gain, and it might be that he could tell them something that would help them in their trouble. They need not abide by what he said, but they should listen. Then said they to Asaf Khan:

"Tell us, O stranger, what is in thy mind? Of a truth our hearts are heavy this day, and we know not what to do."

Then answered them Asaf Khan; and though his face was grave, there was laughter in his heart.

"Bring to me your mullahs; for of a surety on such an errand came your mullahs with ye. Where be these mullahs?"

But the men hung their heads with shame and answered not, till Asaf Khan pointed to one and bade him speak. The man would have pressed back into the crowd; but his friends closed the way and pushed him forward, fearing lest, should he not answer, they might be called upon to speak.

They had brought mullahs, the man confessed; for as the stranger rightly said, they must have mullahs with them seeing the errand on which they had come. But for what they had done, when they strove together and three men were slain and the Holy Pir angered, their mullahs were wroth and would not speak with them, calling them followers of evil.

Nor would the mullahs bear them company that day when they came once more to entreat the forgiveness of the Holy Pir, but sat together in a mosque in a neighbouring hamlet.

Naught could be done unless the mullahs were there, said Asaf Khan. This was a matter for holy men, not for common people. Because the common people had tried to do this thing of themselves had misfortune come upon them ; and he bade the men go fetch their mullahs. This was a matter for the mullahs to decide, without them he could do naught.

Then went the men away to bring their mullahs, and Asaf Khan followed, but at a distance. The boy also came ; for he knew well Asaf Khan sported with these men, and he would see what came of it.

To the mosque went the men, and begged the mullahs to come to the shrine by the wayside, where it would now be decided with whom the Holy Pir should go. But when the mullahs questioned them, they could not deny that the Holy Pir was still wroth, nor could they say that he had promised to come with any. But they hid from the mullahs the fresh evil they had wrought, and begged them to come to the mosque and listen to what a wise stranger had to say. The stranger was a friend of the Pir's, and the Pir would hearken to him.

Some of the mullahs rose and prepared to go with their men ; but others of the mullahs would not, saying they knew well these men planned some fresh mischief. It was not in the hearts of these men to repent them sincerely

of their evil deeds, and with them they would not go.

Now, when the men with whom these mullahs had come saw that other mullahs went with their men, their hearts were filled with fear lest the stranger should speak, and it be decided in their absence with whom the Holy Pir should go first.

Then did Satan enter into the hearts of those wicked men, and seizing their mullahs, they beat them and drove them before them to the mosque, the mullahs weeping and cursing, and Asaf Khan laughing afar. Never had he spent such a merry day. But he slipped back through the graveyard behind the mosque, and when the men were assembled with their mullahs, he came forward as he had come from the mosque.

With men that shouted, mullahs that wept, and mullahs that cursed, so great was the noise that for some time Asaf Khan could not get a hearing. But presently did they fall silent, and then did Asaf Khan command that the twelve mullahs should stand before all, as he would speak to them.

The mullahs came forward, some of themselves and some who were pushed, and Asaf Khan spoke.

"Ye be mullahs, therefore ye be holy men," he said.

There was a murmur at this, and one or two in the throng laughed. But the mullahs answered never a word, some because they were angered with this man who took authority

upon himself and spoke thus to them, others because they would not speak a lie before so many who knew they lied ; and Asaf Khan continued—

" Say : is it not written that whatever the matter on which ye dispute, with Allah doth the decision rest ? Therefore did I say unto the Holy Pir that these men should draw lots ; Allah would decide. But the men did evil ; and the drawing of the lots but caused further strife, and angered the Holy One so that he cursed them for evil men, and going within his room, bolted himself therein. But now ye are come, all mullahs and holy men ; do ye draw lots with the sticks, and to ye shall Allah disclose his will, with whom he would have the Holy One first dwell."

This saying found favour with the mullahs, and also with the throng ; and again was the boy sent to gather sticks. None went with the boy this time to help him, for they feared the eye of Asaf Khan ; and when the boy brought the sticks, Asaf Khan turned him about and prepared them with his knife.

Then came he to the edge of the platform, and calling to him the mullahs one by one, bade them draw. And after they had made an end to the drawing, he bade them measure their sticks one with the other and proclaim aloud which one of them had drawn the longer stick. But when they measured their sticks, lo ! no one had drawn the longer stick. All the sticks were of a length !

Now was the outcry louder than at the first

time, when the men drew ; for this matter was past understanding. Before, each knew the other had cheated ; but some of these mullahs were known to be holy men, and none could believe that they would do such evil. Yet were the sticks all the same length, no man's stick being longer than another's.

Asaf Khan's face was grave and stern ; but he dared not look to where the boy sat, for he knew the boy laughed, knowing well that Asaf Khan had himself cut the sticks all of a length. But none in the throng doubted this stranger who of his goodness had tried to help them in their trouble, and they knew not what to think.

Grave and stern was Asaf Khan's face, and he looked angrily upon the mullahs.

"Even as your men are, so are ye!" he thundered. "Evil are your ways, and of such as ye it is written that for those who have done evil, their recompense shall be evil in like degree, and shame shall be their portion —no protection shall they have against Allah, as though their faces were blackened with the darkness of night! These shall be inmates of the fire ; therein shall they abide for ever!"

On the Holy Koran, and on the Holy Qaaba at Mecca swore the mullahs that not one of them had changed his stick. May Allah strike them dead in his wrath if they lied. Many also spoke in favour of the mullahs, saying they were holy men and also, added one, with too much wit to attempt a trick that had once been found out. All men spoke on behalf

of the mullahs, praying Asaf Khan not to be wroth with them, and at last Asaf Khan's anger was appeased.

"This, then, is a sign," he said, "and the sign hath one of two meanings. Either Allah doth not will that the Holy Pir should leave the place where he now dwells, or it is his will that the Holy One should go with all, to dwell in the lands of all. That he would that the Holy One should stay here, cannot be, else would he not have put it into his heart to go; yet how he may go with all, I cannot say. Let us now disperse, for the sun is low, and to-morrow will we talk over this matter. Perchance Allah may vouchsafe a dream to one showing how this may be, how the Holy Pir may go to dwell in the lands of all."

Naught else could be done; for in truth, so strange had been the happenings of that day that none could think clearly. The Holy Pir was wrath with them: men had been slain: mullahs had been beaten: verily this was an unlucky day, and it was best to leave the matter till the morrow. With many thanks to the stranger for the help he had given them in their trouble, they left the mosque and went their way.

Asaf Khan went to the door of the hut and knocked.

"The evil men are gone, O Holy One, and will not return. Come forth, therefore, and give us food, for we hunger."

Thus did Asaf Khan show his craft. Had he said nothing save that the men were gone,

the Pir might not have come forth, for still his anger burned hot within him ; but the claims of the hungry must not be disregarded, and he came from the hut.

They cooked and ate their food in silence, save that the boy once or twice laughed softly ; and after they had eaten, they rested a while. Asaf Khan would have had the Pir talk ; but the Holy One was still disturbed at the wicked doings of this day, and he would not speak save to mutter curses on the evil doers.

Presently there came a man to the mosque ; and at his coming the Holy Pir started to his feet. He would receive no more messages from these wicked men, he would not even see their messenger ; and entering his room, he slammed and bolted the door. Asaf Khan laughed, and asked the man his business.

The man had not come to the Pir ; it was to Asaf Khan he had come ; and he came to bid Asaf Khan come and stay the night with him, he and his young brother, in a house he had rented in the hamlet. A feast had been prepared and some of his friends, and they wished that the man who had helped them that day would honour them with his presence at the feast. Also, it was not meet that a man of the stranger's quality should sleep in the open like an animal when he could sleep under a roof. Lastly—but he said this with lowered voice so that the Holy Pir should not hear—after the feast there would be a dance. A famous dancer was passing, and stayed the night in the hamlet.

The man was one of those who had come to take the Pir to their homes. He was better dressed than most, and Asaf Khan thought this a pleasant way to end a pleasant day. He had eaten; but the food at the mosque was plain and not over plentiful, and he could eat more, especially of the dainties that would be served at the feast. Also, there was the dance. Tapping at the door of the hut, he told the mullah where he went, and leaving his horse in charge of the boy, whom he refused to take with him to the feast, he accompanied the man to the hamlet.

It was not far, and when he arrived Asaf Khan was not sorry he had come; for in the courtyard without the house were many steaming cauldrons emitting savoury odours, and within the room was a girl singing—for the dancers of the East both sing and dance, sing even more than they dance, the dance being often but to illustrate the song.

A great company was assembled, for all the men of the neighbouring hamlets had been called and most had come. Of strangers, those who had come for the Holy Pir, there were few; but the host said he had not invited these men lest the going of the Pir occasion dispute, and there be quarrels at the feast and the pleasures of the evening be spoilt. For good food heats the blood of men, and when the blood is hot, then is anger swift to arise.

Merrily passed the evening. Many were the guests, both from that hamlet and from

hamlets near by. Rich and plentiful was the fare, and the dancer sang of love and was pleasing to behold. Sherbet of many sorts passed round; and even the forbidden wine was to be had by those who wished it and would step into an adjoining chamber.

Merriiy passed the evening; but presently Asaf Khan missed his host. Perchance he was in the other chamber with those who indulged in the forbidden drink, so he said naught. But as the night drew on and the host came not, he questioned one who sat beside him. Where was their host? What was the real reason he asked none of his own folk to the feast, nor any of those who had come from afar, bidding only the men of the hamlets and Asaf Khan. For always did Asaf Khan doubt what he was told till he had proved its truth.

The man shook his head foolishly. He was one who had been to the other chamber, and he knew their host was not there. But what mattered! Each man could do as he liked. It might be that there were two dancers, and the other danced for their host alone. Perchance there were three dancers; for of a truth it seemed that two danced before him, though only one sang.

Turning from the man in disgust, for to Asaf Khan strong drink was an abomination, he questioned another; but neither did this man know anything of their host. Of the other strangers, those who had come from the Holy Pir—Allah's curse rest upon them!—he had

heard that on leaving the mosque they held a meeting, first posting men about them so that none should approach unseen. It must have been some secret matter they wished to discuss, but what it was he could not say. How the Holy Pir might go with all, thought Asaf Khan, with a smile, little knowing how true was the thought.

And then came a commotion outside; and as all sprang to their feet, a man burst into the room, panting and wringing his hands. "The Holy Pir!" he wailed. "They have taken the Holy Pir!"

Then did Asaf Khan laugh. So at last these men had done what he would have done at the beginning; they had taken the Holy One against his will. But who had taken him? How had they decided with whom he should go first? The man was still weeping and wringing his hands helplessly.

"Alas! the unhappy day! They have taken away our Holy Pir! They have taken him away, and have not left us even one piece! Alas!"

"Thou fool!" said Asaf Khan impatiently. "How could they leave a piece? Who have taken him? In which direction went they?"

"They have taken him everywhere!" was the baffling reply. "To every land hath he gone, for each one took a piece!"

Asaf Khan seized the man by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Fool! Tell a plain tale. What have they done with the Holy Pir?"

Then with tears and lamentations did the man tell his sorrowful tale. The strangers had held a council. None would allow the Pir to go to the land of another, to none would he go of himself. Yet it was Allah's will that he should go forth into all lands, for Allah had sent him the thought, therefore to all lands should he go. They themselves would carry out the decree of Allah.

Then went they to the mosque, those children of Satan, and taking the Holy Pir from his hut, cut him in pieces and departed, each party going to their home with a share, leaving nothing over which the people of the land could erect a shrine.

Thus the Holy Pir who would not go to one place went to all, and over each piece was erected a holy shrine. And the blessing of Allah came to all lands instead of to one only, for in all lands the cattle waxed fat and were heavy with milk, nor did the harvest ever fail in those lands.

Then did Asaf Khan curse himself for a fool, and liken his craft to the simplicity of a little child. He had thought to play with these men, and lo ! they had played with him. For this man at whose feast he sat had deceived him as few had deceived him since his beard grew.

And the men of that hamlet and of other hamlets arose and came to the mosque, and it was even as the man had said. Their Holy Pir was gone, and not a piece remained.

But his blood lay by the roadside, and over this they afterwards erected a shrine ; and when

in after years Asaf Khan passed that way, the mullah of the mosque told him many tales of the great virtues of this shrine, how it healed the sick and brought great blessings to those who made offerings—Asaf Khan took the hint and handed the mullah some money—how the land flourished exceedingly for the holiness of the man over whose blood the shrine was erected ; how the cattle were fat and the harvest plentiful, and all things were as in the days when the Holy Pir himself dwelt in the land.

CHAPTER VI

HOW THE KHAN'S BROTHER FELL OUT OF THE WINDOW

IT was a fair land over which Asaf Khan now travelled ; for many portions of the Border are green, with running water, and with many fields and trees. Portions there are, dreary as any desert of Arbistan, grey, parched, and burnt up by the pitiless sun ; but other places there be that rival the garden in which the father and mother of all men were placed when He created them for His pleasure. It was through a land such as this latter that Asaf Khan passed after leaving the mosque where had dwelt the Holy Pir who had now gone forth in pieces to bring a blessing to many lands.

Greatly was Asaf Khan diverted by the doings of the day and night. He chuckled over the matter of the sticks, at the men who changed them, and at the weeping mullahs who changed them not yet whose sticks were all of a length. But most was he diverted by the going forth of the Holy Pir to all parts, himself in parts. Though if ever he met the man who

tricked him to the feast, that man would rue the day he ventured to play with Asaf Khan.

When the men of the hamlet had departed to their homes, it was daylight, and Asaf Khan sought the boy, but found him not at the mosque. The boy had he not taken to the feast; for Asaf Khan knew that the men of these parts indulged in strong drink, and he would not that the mind of this boy should be contaminated thus young. Also, he was over young to witness a dance such as would be danced for these men—and should the woman be beautiful and to Asaf Khan's liking, he might be in the way. Therefore did Asaf Khan leave the boy at the mosque.

But now was the boy not there. At first, when he called and the boy answered not, Asaf Khan thought he might be dead. He was a boy of spirit; when the men came to take the Holy Pir he might have tried to prevent them and been slain; and Asaf Khan sought the body to give it burial. But no body did he find, and he knew the boy lived. Since the boy was not a Holy Pir, the men had not taken his pieces, nor would they have taken him whole if they had slain him. Either the boy had been seized and taken away as a slave, or else he had gone with the men of his own will. But that he was alive, Asaf Khan had no further doubt. He had wondered more and more what he should do with this boy; but the matter was now taken out of his hands, and he was thankful.

The horse was where he had left it, so, as

there was nothing to wait for, he prepared to set out for the large village that lay further along the road; for he wished to sell a jewel and have money in his purse, and not be dependent on the charity of mosques, where the food is inferior, and nowhere as plentiful as at this mosque. He saddled his horse, and lo! the boy arrived.

Asaf Khan frowned. He thought he was rid of the boy, and the boy had again returned. The boy came forward and held out his open hand.

"I hid," he said, "and not till they had gone did I come forth. At first I would have run to tell thee the news; but then I had another thought. All men would now receive benefits for the sake of this Holy Pir, only we would receive none. Why should this be? Therefore did my mind alter, and instead of speeding to thee, I followed one of the parties. In the darkness they knew me not as a stranger, and I mingled with them, seeking that which they bore. At last I found it. Great was their fortune, for they had obtained for their share a whole arm and hand.

"At first they travelled fast, for they feared lest the men of the hamlets collect and come in force to wrest from them their treasure; but presently they walked more slowly, and after a time they rested and talked. Of where in their land the shrine should be erected they talked; and because one would have it near his hamlet, and another near his, they grew angry with each other and high words passed.

So angry were they, that they forgot for a time their precious burden, and thought more of the knives they wore within their belts.

" Then did I steal quietly to where the treasure lay, and with my knife did I sever two fingers. For a knife I have, which was given me when I guarded the door of the hut in which thou wert confined. Here be the two fingers. Take thou one, and I will take the other, so shall good fortune be with us always."

Again did Asaf Khan laugh ; but he bade the boy keep both the fingers. He, Asaf Khan, needed no more fortune than that his right arm would win for him.

Then rode they forth, and after a while they came to the village of which Asaf Khan had been told. It was a large village, with gate, encircling walls, and towers ; and within rose a lofty building that Asaf Khan knew must be the dwelling of the Khan, for only a Khan would possess such a building.

One thing more did the building tell Asaf Khan. He was near the border of Afghanistan, and though the people of that part were of the Tribes, their Khan was of Afghan blood. Perchance his father or grandfather had by force established himself in those parts, perchance his Afghan blood came from intermarriage with Afghanistan ; but that he was of Afghan blood, Asaf Khan knew from the building. The houses of men of the Tribes, even their Khans, are rough ; for the Tribesman despises elegance and refinement as a sign of effeminacy and weakness. The upper storey

of this house was beautified with colours and elegant in design, therefore had this Khan Afghan blood and tastes.

One thing about the house pleased Asaf Khan much. This was the house of a wealthy man and a man who loved beautiful things; and the Khan would willingly purchase aught Asaf Khan might wish to sell, giving a good price for what he took—unless he took by force and paid nothing. But this Asaf Khan doubted; nevertheless, to make sure, before he approached the village he descended from his horse, and entering a copse, buried all the jewels save two rings. Now he could take the rings from his waistcloth, where he kept them seeing he had no belt, and the Khan, knowing he had no more, would not grow greedy of heart.

The gates of the village were open, and riding up the street to the gate of the Khan's courtyard, the boy walking beside him, Asaf Khan demanded admittance. He wished to see the Khan on business. The land in those parts was peaceful, and the gatekeeper threw open the gate without further question.

The Khan had not yet risen; for Kahns sleep later than common folk, perchance because they eat more, perchance because they have many wives; and it was a full hour ere the Khan sent for Asaf Khan and asked his business.

The Khan was a bluff, frank man, a man after Asaf Khan's heart; and he haggled not about the price of the ring Asaf Khan showed him,

paying without questioning the price asked. Nor was he curious to know if Asaf Khan had more. He was past middle age, and already were a few grey hairs showing in his beard, so that he had knowledge of men, and soon knew that Asaf Khan was no trader, but a warrior. Even warriors are reduced at times to disposing of articles of price, so that they may live, or buy arms wherewith to procure other articles of price.

Once had a man, undoubtedly a warrior, come to him with some rich cloth to sell. The Khan guessed this to be a love gift, and bought it ; nor did he think less of the man for selling it, or consider him less a warrior. Only when a man buys things to sell again at a profit does a man become a trader and cease to be a warrior.

Long talked the Khan with Asaf Khan ; for in his youth he had been a great warrior ; and afterwards he called his servants, bidding them prepare a room where Asaf Khan and his brother might sleep ; and though Asaf Khan would have refused, saying he would go further, his heart not being inclined to one place, the Khan would take no denial. For a week must Asaf Khan stay with him as his guest, and afterwards he could go where he listed ; but for a week he must stay, for the Khan liked his talk and would have more of it.

And so Asaf Khan dwelt in the house of this Khan. To none, not even to the Khan did he say that the boy was not his brother, lest hearing that the boy was naught to him, they

might try to steal the boy so as to sell him. Also did he tell the boy to be careful to whom he spoke, and what he said ; lest the boy tell one tale of whence they came, and he tell another. Not for a week, but for twelve days dwelt Asaf Khan in the house of the Khan, and then he went forth. But not as he came did he leave, for the boy left not with him, and this is how it came to pass.

Now, this Khan was past the age when men have sons nearly grown ; yet this Khan had no son, not even a child, and Asaf Khan wondered. The Khan had a brother, and this brother would be Khan after him, and Asaf Khan misliked this brother of the Khan, who was a man with a sly face and an eye that would not meet the eyes of other men. Asaf Khan liked not this brother, and wondered why the Khan, if his wives were old or barren, did not marry other wives. But of this he said naught to the Khan, for such things must not be spoken of between men. Still, he wondered.

For three days Asaf Khan dwelt with the Khan, and then, as he sat one evening in the courtyard under the shadow of a tree, a man passed him. Many men had passed Asaf Khan in the courtyard that evening, and to none did he take heed ; but this man walked not as the others did. He walked softly, and across his mouth was the end of his turban.

Now, when men travel, often do they cast the end of their turban across their mouths so that dust may not enter ; but men do not walk thus in courtyards. This man must

wish to remain unknown, else would he not thus hide half his face. The man passed through the courtyard, leaving by the gate; and slipping off his sandals, Asaf Khan followed.

It might be that the man went on a lover's quest; but Asaf Khan had marked the form of the man, and to his mind had come the thought that this was the brother of the Khan. The brother of the Khan did not look like a man given to love's dalliance, and yet he walked with his face half hid. There must be a reason, and Asaf Khan would know that reason. It may have been instinct, for Asaf Khan was not given to prying too closely into the affairs of other men, save when he thought the matter affected him; but he followed the man, determined to find out why he walked thus.

At first he had disliked, now he distrusted this brother of the Khan. The man's thin, hatchet face with its long, drooping nose and pallid complexion filled him with distaste, and the sly look in the shifty eyes intensified this dislike. The man was false of heart, and any secret undertaking of his would bear watching.

Asaf Khan trod softly. No man on earth can tread as the Tribesman treads, as many an unfortunate sentry has learnt to his cost, when a knife between the ribs or in the back has been the first intimation he has received of the presence of the rifle thief. Asaf Khan trod softly, and followed the man.

Emerging from the gate, he saw the figure

of the man he followed disappear from view round the corner of the wall. He followed, and within a hundred yards he saw the man enter the gate of a courtyard, a courtyard he had seen the Khan's brother enter before this day. And now did Asaf Khan know the man was on no errand of love, for no secret lover enters openly a courtyard; and passing swiftly the intervening space, he stood beneath the wall. He could not enter by the gate, he must seek another way; he would see if this man entered the house or remained in the courtyard.

And now he was sure that the brother of the Khan meant evil; for this house had been pointed out to him as that of a man who was an enemy of the Khan. The man was harsh and overbearing, and having a little wealth, had sought to impose his will upon the people of the village. They had appealed to the Khan, and summoning the man, the Khan warned him that, rich though he might be, did he not mend his ways, he would be expelled from the village. Therefore was this man the Khan's enemy; and the brother of the Khan entered this man's house at night, his face muffled so that none should know it was he who entered. Of a truth this was a matter that must be seen to.

Along the front of this courtyard ran the narrow street down which Asaf Khan had just come. Behind it was the house, and along one side the houses of other people. The other side had an open space without, in the centre

of which lay a pool of water at which the cattle sometimes drank, and on which the village ducks and geese disported themselves. To this side went Asaf Khan, and found a tree growing by the wall.

The tree stood some slight distance away, but one branch, a thick one, grew towards the courtyard. It would bend beneath his weight, and would then be near enough, he thought, for him to reach the wall. Without a sound he climbed the tree. The branch swung softly outward, and he was on the wall. All was dark within the courtyard, and he could see naught; but presently the murmur of voices reached his ear. They came from a short distance to his right, and Asaf Khan crept towards the sound.

On his belly he crept, so that his form should not be seen against the sky by anyone within the courtyard; and inch by inch he crept, so that those who talked should hear no sound. Thus it was long ere he reached the speakers, and they were nearly done. One was the brother of the Khan, and he was speaking.

"I had thought to gain most of the Khan's men over to my side, but it was not to be. Most are faithful, and to but few dared I disclose my plan. But thou hast many men; and with thy men and the few of the house who have joined me—we will be strong enough to overcome those who remain faithful. But I like not the presence of this man Asaf Khan. He looks a man given to fighting, and also to interfering in the affairs of others. Also,

he has friendship with my brother, the Khan. Perchance it were well to wait till he be gone."

"We cannot wait," replied another voice. "All is prepared, and should the matter be now put off, someone may betray the secret. What then would be thy fate? For to-morrow night it was arranged, and to-morrow night must it be done. Return now, lest some seek thee," and rising from the bedstead on which they had been seated, two figures walked to the gate of the courtyard.

Long thought Asaf Khan that night over what he had heard. The Khan was threatened, of that there was no doubt; and that there were traitors in the Khan's house besides the brother of the Khan was equally certain. But who were traitors and who faithful he had no means of knowing. Of himself he could do naught in this matter; and in the morning he told all to the Khan.

The Khan shrugged his shoulders.

"As well one as another," he said. "It is as Allah wills; though I would my brother had waited. I have no son, nor will I ever have a son, so my brother will be Khan when I am gone."

"Thou art old," urged Asaf Khan. "If thy wives give thee no sons, marry other wives."

The Khan gave Asaf Khan a strange look. For a while he was silent, and then he beckoned the other to approach him nearer.

"I shall tell thee what I have told to no man. Never can I have a son. One son I had, but he died; and then did that befall

which is the cause of my having no more sons. I was out riding, and my horse stumbled. Then was I injured so that I must be brought home on a litter. A hakim tended me and cured me of the hurt, but the injury remained, and never can I have a son. To none have I told this thing, for it is a great shame; but thou art a true man and will keep my secret."

"The hakim?" asked Asaf Khan briefly.

"Him I slew as soon as I was well, for hakims talk much."

Asaf Khan nodded. "It is good; else had thy secret been no secret. Who scratches at the door?"

It was the boy, and when bidden he entered. His arm was healing rapidly, and gave him no trouble. He came to say that the slight lameness from which Asaf Khan's horse had suffered the previous day was now gone; and after delivering his message he would have left.

But Asaf Khan detained him. The boy was fearless and faithful, it would be well to tell him what was toward. As Asaf Khan acknowledged after the affair at the goldsmith's village, the boy in guile was a match, more than a match for Asaf Khan himself. But none in the Khan's house knew this; he was but a boy, and the men would not be careful in his presence. It might be that he could learn more of this plot. The Khan agreed, and Asaf Khan told the boy what he had already told the Khan.

Now, the head of youth is quickly turned,

and that he should have been told this matter pleased the boy greatly. Also, it made him think himself already a man, a man of importance.

"There is naught to fear, O Khan," he said soothingly. "Is not Asaf Khan here, and am not I, Rahim Khan here!"

He picked himself up from the floor where a backhand blow from Asaf Khan had sent him, and retired grumbling to a corner.

The Khan smiled. "The lad has spirit," he said; and he sighed. "Would that he had been my son!"

"He has neither father nor mother," ventured Asaf Khan. If the Khan adopted the boy, it would be good; then would the boy be provided for, and Asaf Khan could once more journey alone as always he loved to do.

The Khan looked at Asaf Khan curiously.

"To every man his own business, but is it not strange that thy young brother should be with thee so far from his home? Were there none with whom he could be left?"

"He is not my brother," said Asaf Khan; and he told the Khan all, how he first met the boy, how he had carried the boy away from the village gate, and how the boy had rescued him when he lay bound in the village of the goldsmith. Again he urged the Khan to adopt the boy, but the Khan shook his head.

"I would that I could, for of a truth he would be a son to be proud of; but it may not be, else would I long since have adopted a son. My sister's sons may live, and after my death

there would surely be trouble if they ever came to hear that I had adopted one not of our House ; for as thou well knowest, if there be a boy of our House, him must I adopt before an outsider. I had a sister ; but many years since she went with the maidens to the village spring to bring water. There they were set upon by men, and three maidens were borne away ere the men of the village could turn out to the rescue. My sister was one of those taken, and naught have I heard of her since that day. Before, the thought troubled me little, since I have a brother to be Khan after me ; but now that my brother has planned this wickedness, I would that I knew where my sister was taken. I would send for her, and I would make her son my heir ; for surely the boy would be brave, being the son of a brave father, for brave he was to have come thus far into a strange country in search of a bride."

The boy had risen from the corner, and now came and stood before the Khan. Asaf Khan aimed a second blow at him ; but he ducked, and removed out of reach. " When I rise," growled Asaf Khan, " I shall teach thee, saucy one, to come not where men talk."

The boy scowled at him and turned to the Khan.

" Knowest thou the name of the man who took thy sister ? "

" He shouted his name as he rode away, bidding the maidens go tell their Khan that he had taken the Khan's sister to wife. But

where he went I know not, nor since that day have I heard his name."

"My mother's name was Raziya," said the boy, "and my father's name was Ahmed Khan. My mother died at giving me birth, and Asaf Khan saw my father die."

The Khan started to his feet. "Thy mother's name was Raziya?"

The boy bared his arm. "Her name was Raziya, and my father brought her from another country. He has often told me how he bore her away from the spring where she went with the other village maidens to draw water. My father bound this about my arm," showing a silver amulet, "saying that it was a trinket she valued."

The Khan grasped the boy's arm and stared at the charm.

"It is the same!" and dropping the boy's arm he passed his hand across his eyes. "I gave it to my sister when we were children and played together. Then," and again he seized the boy, "if she was thy mother, thou art my sister's son!"

Asaf Khan had also risen. "Allah is great," he said, "and mysterious are his ways. Of a truth this must be the son of thy sister, brought to thy roof thus strangely."

Then was the Khan filled with an exceeding great joy. He had found the son of his sister, the sister whom he had dearly loved, and he could now adopt a son. This boy would he adopt, to be a comfort to him in his old age, and to succeed him as Kahn when he died.

He knew from Asaf Khan the courage of this boy, and this brave lad would be a son to be proud of. Embracing the boy, he bade Asaf Khan call in all the men of his household, for he would at once declare this boy the son of his sister, and would formally adopt him as his own son.

But now the boy grew stubborn. He was the son of the Khan's sister, he acknowledged; but to be the son of the Khan he had no wish. The young thirst for adventure, and the boy would continue with Asaf Khan where adventures would be many; he wished not a life of ease in the house of the Khan.

At length they prevailed; but not till the Khan had drawn the boy aside and called shame upon him for wishing to burden thus a stranger. He was naught to Asaf Khan, and Asaf Khan had far to go; could he be hampered with a boy? In return for what Asaf Khan had done for him, he would now put this trouble upon Asaf Khan. The boy had not looked at the matter in this light; and he now agreed that if Asaf Khan truthfully said that he would rather travel alone, he, Rahim Khan, would remain in the house of his uncle, the Khan.

Asaf Khan laughed. "Of a truth would I be rather alone," he said. "Thy courage is great, and some day shalt thou be a great warrior; but where and how I go, a man is better alone. Also, there are things of which a boy knows naught, such things as happened in the village of the goldsmith, and thou art better here."

Then were the Khan's men called, and to them was made known the glad news. To them was shown the boy, and also the charm he wore upon his arm. In his features could some of the older men trace a resemblance to the lost sister of the Khan, and many were there who recognised the charm she wore as a child on a silk thread about her neck. This was the son of the Khan's sister, and as such all welcomed him to the home of his mother.

Only the brother of the Khan welcomed not the boy ; and his face grew dark. Here was an heir, and this boy would succeed the present Khan. But the dark look passed from his face, and he smiled an evil smile. To-night would the way be made clear for him, and when the Khan was removed it would be an easy matter to remove the boy at the same time. But he looked askance at Asaf Khan.

Asaf Khan might not have interfered in the matter of the Khan, he being a stranger, and this being a matter which concerned two brothers of one house ; but in regard to the boy it would be different. He had heard that the boy had done Asaf Khan a great service, though what this service was he knew not ; in return for the service Asaf Khan would guard the boy, and would be wroth with any who sought to injure him. And now to injure the Khan was to injure the boy, for the boy was the Khan's heir. To dispossess the Khan was to dispossess the boy, and he had no doubt Asaf Khan would now join the party of the Khan and not stand aloof.

But Asaf Khan was one man. Those within the house who would join him, together with those who came from without, would be more than a match for the faithful ones, even though they had Asaf Khan to help them. It must be remembered that the fame of Asaf Khan had not reached these parts, else had not the brother of the Khan thought so foolishly.

Great was the feasting, and great the joy in the village when the news was made known. In every house was a feast prepared by the women, and throughout the day came a string of men to the Khan's house, to wish the Khan joy and to greet the boy who would some day be their Khan.

And so the day passed. All was outward peace and joy; but Asaf Khan walked with watchful eyes. Stationed at the gate of the courtyard, he noted those who came from the gate he had seen the Khan's brother pass through the previous evening, and these men he watched. They came with smiles on their faces and words of greeting and good wishes on their lips; but Asaf Khan often marked that they exchanged glances with some of the Khan's household, and the faces of these men of the household he remembered.

The evening came, and now the Khan called to him his servants—for so had Asaf Khan advised him—and choosing out those whom Asaf Khan had marked exchanging glances with the men of the other house, he told them their wickedness was known, that the plot had been discovered, and that they must leave

the village at once, never more to enter it on pain of being shot.

They denied stoutly that they had conspired against the Khan, swearing by the Koran that never had they harboured thought of ill against the Khan, who had been as a father to them and who treated them so well. But the brother of the Khan was a cunning man, and coming to the door of the chamber he heard all that passed therein.

Then did he think how he could best save himself from his brother's anger. When the servants were all sent for and he not called, he wondered; and creeping to the door, he listened through a crack to what the Khan said. The Khan knew all. That he knew was certain, though how he came by this knowledge his brother could not guess. But the Khan knew the truth; and though the men might deny it, the Khan would know they lied.

Bursting open the door, he rushed into the chamber and threw himself at his brother's feet, making full confession of the evil he would have done and craving forgiveness. Never would he offend again in like manner. It had not been in his mind till evil men had put the thought there. And he had already repented. He was seeking the men to tell them he had repented of the evil he would have done, when he was told they were with the Khan. Coming to the door, he learnt that the Khan already knew all—for which he was thankful, as he was thus spared the telling of the shameful tale himself.

Then was the Khan's heart moved with kindness, and he raised his brother and forgave him, forgiving also those men who had joined in the plot. Asaf Khan silently cursed him for a fool, though openly he said nothing; and presently the servants were dismissed, those who had conspired being warned that next time there would be no forgiveness.

There would be no one to forgive, thought Asaf Khan grimly; for next time the plot would succeed. And after the Khan's brother left, he remonstrated with the Khan on his foolishness.

"This brother of thine," he said, "is no true man. Evil is written on his face, and from the first I have distrusted him. Therefore did I follow him, and therefore art thou alive who would else be dead."

The Khan shook his head with a smile.

"Thou art hard of heart, O Asaf Khan," he said, "and show little mercy to those who offend thee. My brother sinned; but the temptation was great. After me he would be Khan, but the waiting was long and he is already past his first youth. He was tempted by others to hurry up the day when he would be Khan, and being tempted, he fell. Who of us is proof against temptation? Now this my son will be Khan after me, so the temptation is removed and my brother will not sin again."

Asaf Khan was not convinced, though he said nothing at that time; but afterwards he wondered if he were doing well in leaving the boy with the Khan. If the Khan chose to

be a fool, let him suffer for his folly ; but now would the boy be involved in his fate, for when the Khan was slain the boy would be slain with him. He said nothing of these thoughts, talking on other matters till it was time to retire ; but he thought long that night.

His great regret was that the men of the other house had not come. Then would there have been a glorious fight, and none would afterwards have joined in the plans of the brother of the Khan. At first he thought they had been warned that the plan had miscarried ; but no one had left the house, of that he was certain. Not a man left the courtyard that evening after they learnt that the Khan knew the truth, for even those who had been faithful would fear lest suspicion be directed against them. Those men could not have been warned ; it must be that they had collected at the other house, and there awaited a signal to come on to the Khan's. When no signal was given, they knew something untoward had occurred, and dispersed to their several homes.

That the Khan's brother would now let matters rest was unlikely. He was exposed, and always would his brother know him for what he was. Also the men would talk, and all the village would soon know what the Khan's brother would have done. This man would not let the matter rest, of that Asaf Khan was certain. He could not. In a while he would begin again, and next time there would be no Asaf Khan. He, Asaf Khan, must unmask this villain completely ere he left,

else could he not leave the boy in this place of danger. Yet he would rather that the boy could stay. He must watch, and if necessary stay here another week. If he could in this time show the Khan's brother for what he was, all would be well, and he could leave alone. Otherwise he would take the boy with him, leaving the Khan to the fate he so richly deserved for his leniency towards his false brother.

Next morning Asaf Khan posted himself at a window from where he could see both the gate of the Khan's courtyard and the gate of the other house. But none from the Khan's house passed within the other gate that day. At evening he went to the gate of the courtyard and talked for long with the gatekeeper, telling him many tales to while away the time; but after dark none went forth from the court-yard, and when the gate was locked for the night, Asaf Khan returned to his room.

And so three days passed. Some men from the other house passed the Khan's house and cast curious glances at it; but none entered, nor did any man of the Khan's house go to the other. Doubtless men of the two parties met in the village; but the leader of the others would do naught till he had speech with the brother of the Khan, and the Khan's brother left not the house in those days. Nor did he write. He was a clever man, and only fools commit to paper that which may bear witness against them on some future day. But through his men he could arrange a meeting; and therefore

did Asaf Khan never for a moment relax his vigilance.

Another three days passed thus ; and then Asaf Khan began to suspect that by some means the brother of the Khan had learnt who had betrayed him to the Khan, and was now having Asaf Khan himself watched. And this indeed was the truth ; for one had seen Asaf Khan enter the courtyard after the Khan's brother that night.

Now, this man was of the brother's party, and seeing Asaf Khan on entering cast a glance about the courtyard, he knew this stranger had followed his master from without, and would now know if the one he followed had gone direct to his room. When they talked among themselves, wondering who could have betrayed their plan to the Khan, this man told them what he had seen that night, and after that day was Asaf Khan watched.

But they had a more crafty man than any of their party in this stranger ; and once Asaf Khan's suspicions were aroused, it was not long ere he had turned surmise into certainty. In the house was he watched, and without the house was he watched ; if he would catch the Khan's brother in his villainy, he must alter his tactics. That there was fresh villainy afoot he was now quite certain, else why was he watched ?

Next day he asked the Khan to give him another room. This one overlooked the courtyard, he said, and the noise that came from the courtyard disturbed him. Also, since the boy

had been adopted by the Khan and had been given a room near the Khan's room, Asaf Khan was alone ; and the room, he said, was too large for one. He wanted a small room. There was a room at the back of the house which no one occupied, and this room he would like to have.

The room was a very small one, and the Khan pressed Asaf Khan to take another ; but the room the Khan would have given him was on the side towards the house where the brother of the Khan had planned his late wickedness, and this room Asaf Khan would not have. At length the Khan allowed Asaf Khan to occupy the small room he had chosen, and Asaf Khan shifted his few belongings. Then went he to the brother of the Khan with outstretched hand.

"I crave thy pardon," he said frankly. "Since the day I discovered thy plan to oust thy brother and take his place, have I suspected thee. For I will now tell thee what thou knewest not before ; it was even I who told the Khan. I was passing the courtyard the night thou didst go for the last time to see the master of the house, and at the gate, thou not seeing me in the darkness I overheard some words of thine and told the Khan. Thy brother forgave thee, and I will not hide from thee that it was against my will, for still I mistrusted thee. But he hath known thee all his life, and knoweth thee better than can a stranger. But I doubted the wisdom of what he had done, and since that day have I watched thee. I was wrong. Thou hast repented, and

I crave thy pardon. Now I know, as did thy brother at the first, that in thy heart is no more evil. Thou wert tempted, and didst yield to temptation. Now thou dost repent thee of the evil thou wouldst have done, and will never again do the like."

Then was the brother of the Khan glad. This was a strong man, and a crafty ; therefore had he feared to do aught while this man remained in the house of the Khan and suspected him. And this man might stay many days ; for never did he speak of leaving, and moreover the Khan loved him and would press him to stay even when at length he wished to go.

In the meantime, the men of the other party grew impatient. He had promised them a great reward when he was Khan, and they were impatient for his reward. Also they feared lest men should learn that the plot was not discarded, but was merely put aside for a time till there was a greater chance of success. Before, he had feared to meet his friend, for Asaf Khan watched at the gate. Yet till he met his friend could nothing be done to forward their plans. But now he need have no fear. This crafty stranger was deceived, even as his brother the Khan was deceived, and this night he would meet his friend.

When night fell, he stole forth and went to the other courtyard. Yet did he not go within till a man had followed him to say that Asaf Khan was within the house and had not come

forth. Then did the Khan's brother slip within the gate of his friend's courtyard, and there talked long with his friend, sitting with him on a bedstead where they had sat the night Asaf Khan overheard their plans. This bedstead lay in the courtyard under some trees, that in the day men could sit in the shade ; and as it was a spare one, it was not taken inside at night.

Now, Asaf Khan said that he had overheard words spoken at the gate, and as the Khan's brother had given some parting instructions to his friend near the gate, he thought these the words Asaf Khan had heard. Had he known the truth, never would he have sat on that charpoy to talk. But he knew not, and therefore did Asaf Khan, lying on the wall, hear all that was said.

Under cover of darkness did Asaf Khan descend from his window by a rope he had secreted in the room, and stealing to the pool, climbed the tree and hid himself on the wall of the courtyard where he had lain hidden that other night. The brother of the Khan would now come to meet his friend and to plan fresh evil. If not that night, then the next night would he come, and each night till he came would Asaf Khan lie in wait on the wall.

The Khan's brother came, and thus did Asaf Khan hear all that was said, and know that the brother of the Khan, far from repenting him of his former evil, would do further evil. Silent he lay, listening to what the two men

said, and when the Khan's brother left the courtyard Asaf Khan slipped from the wall and climbed the rope to his room.

Asaf Khan slept well that night ; for now he could expose the Khan's brother, and the Khan would either punish the man, or drive him forth from the village. Then could Asaf Khan leave the boy with the Khan and go his way.

Asaf Khan strode angrily from the room. This Khan was a fool ! Of all the fools on earth this Khan was the greatest !

In the morning he told all to the Khan, and the Khan thanked him for all his forethought and care ; but when Asaf Khan would have gone forth with the word that the brother of the Khan should be slain, the Khan shook his head. Great was the wrath of Asaf Khan, and to his face he called the Khan a fool. But the Khan was not angered, though he still shook his head. Then did Asaf Khan urge that at least the man should be expelled from the village. Had not the Khan himself said that for a like offence the culprit should be expelled from the village !

Still the Khan shook his head. This was his only brother, and they had grown up from childhood together. He could not be harsh with his brother. He would call his brother to him and reason with him, showing him how he but put himself in peril by his wicked ways. Then would his brother be convinced that he could do nothing against the Khan, and would put this wicked thought from his mind.

Again did Asaf Khan call the Khan a fool. But the Khan only smiled and said Asaf Khan had a hard heart, and at last Asaf Khan left him. But first he made the Khan give him his word that he would speak no word to his brother on the matter this day. The Khan promised, and Asaf Khan left the room to think over what he should now do.

The Khan was a fool. When he spoke, his brother would guess that Asaf Khan had again betrayed the plot, and would be doubly on his guard. He would now do naught till Asaf Khan had left. But that he would fail to make a third attempt, only a fool like the Khan would doubt. And then there would be no Asaf Khan to expose him.

For long did Asaf Khan pace the courtyard in deep thought ; but evening came, and yet he had not thought what it were best for him to do. Stay longer he would not. Already had he stayed more than a week, and if he tarried thus at every place to which he went, he would not see much of the world ere returning to his home. The sun set, and Asaf Khan went to the room of the Khan's brother.

The Khan's brother greeted him warmly. Why had Asaf Khan not come to see him that day ? Much had he heard of Asaf Khan from the men of the house and from his brother. He would know more of Asaf Khan and would make him his friend.

Great friendship did the Khan's brother show to Asaf Khan, bringing him soft cushions on which to sit and cool sherbet to drink.

Long they sat laughing and talking, the Khan's brother telling Asaf Khan tales of that land, and Asaf Khan telling the brother of the Khan some of the adventures he had met with on his way hither.

Many tales did Asaf Khan tell the brother of the Khan. The sun set, and darkness came. The Khan's brother would have called for lamps, but Asaf Khan restrained him saying that he told his tales better in the dark. And so they sat and talked till at last Asaf Khan told the tale of how, a short time before, a man of the Mahsuds had sought to wed him to his daughter against his will. Much did the brother of the Khan laugh at this tale, and clapping Asaf Khan on the back, he called him a crafty one.

Asaf Khan smiled, and then he told the Khan's brother of the goldsmith's wife. And that the tale should be better told, he took the Khan's brother to the window, to show where the bars were and how the ladder was placed.

"Thus I placed the ladder," he said, "and climbing it, entered the chamber. Then did I seize the woman thus," and he seized the Khan's brother, "and thus did I press her back upon the bed," and he pressed the Khan's brother against the window. "Back, back did I press her," and now the Khan's brother was bent back till his body was half out of the window, and he begged Asaf Khan to tell him the rest of the tale while they sat. But a sudden grip closed on his throat, so that his eyes started from his head.

"Last evening was I again on the wall," hissed Asaf Khan. "Fool! Not at the gate did I hear thee that other time, but from the wall near where thou and thy friend sat on a bedstead to talk. Again was I last evening on the wall, and again did I hear thee plot thy wickedness. For thy brother I care naught, he is a fool; but for the boy who is now his son I care much, and I would leave him in safety. With thee alive, there is safety neither for the Khan nor for the boy. Farewell!" and he hurled the brother of the Khan through the window. One scream the man gave as he fell, and Asaf Khan slipped noiselessly from the room.

For a time he sat in his own room, waiting till an outcry from the courtyard should tell him that the scream had been heard and the body discovered. But the room of the Khan's brother was at the end of the courtyard, and none heard the scream, or if they heard, took no note.

Presently one came to Asaf Khan, asking if he would ride forth to the chase the following morning as he had said he would. But Asaf Khan had changed his mind, he said his horse was not used to such hilly country. This was the horse on which he had ridden down from the robbers' retreat in the darkness; but he must have an excuse not to go forth, seeing that he intended leaving the place soon and would have his horse fresh for the journey. He accompanied the man from the chamber, saying that he wished fresh air, and going to

the courtyard walked idly to and fro. Apparently by chance, his footsteps led him to the end of the courtyard, and there, below the window of the Khan's brother, lay a huddled form. Calling some men to him, Asaf Khan turned the body over, and lo ! it was the brother of the Khan, quite dead.

Great was the grief of the Khan when the news was taken to him, how his brother had fallen from the window and was dead, and he tore his hair and beard ; for he loved his brother well in spite of the evil that brother would have done him.

Asaf Khan tried to soothe his grief.

" It is the will of Allah," he said. " When a man's time comes, then must he die, for so it was written. It was written that thy brother should die this day, else had he not leant from the window and so fallen. Grieve not therefore ; for what is, was to be. Also it cannot now be recalled."

A great concourse followed the Khan's brother to the grave next day, and on the day following Asaf Khan left the Khan's house.

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CHAPTER VII

HOW ASAF KHAN BECAME A HADJI

FIR clad spurs ran down into the narrow valley, itself fir-clothed with a rapid stream sparkling down its hollows, a mountain stream, for this place was high in the mountains. Here and there a birch or larch grew over the stream; but mostly were pine trees, the fallen needles of which made a rich, soft carpet underfoot. No villages were there, for thus high corn will not grow, and therefore do not men live here. Occasionally a dilapidated hut may be seen, where those who drive the cattle to the mountains in the hot months take refuge from the mountain storms; but these were now all empty and deserted, for the hot months were over and the cattle were on the lower hills where grass was once more abundant.

Something stirred in the bracken. It was a bear, a Himalayan bear, with the long hair and pig-like snout of the brown Himalayan variety. Lazily it rose, and then, giving itself a shake, waddled down to the stream for a drink. Its thirst quenched, it grubbed about awhile for

tasty roots and then waddled off down the valley. A pine marten with its variegated coat slipped noiselessly from its hole, and mounting a rock sniffed the air suspiciously.

Overhead an eagle swung in wide circles, and a red-headed vulture passed with heavy flight in search of something dead. A marmot whistled, though in those parts marmots are scarce, and a squirrel chased its mate up a neighbouring tree, and then sat on a branch chattering its wrath at a rock python it discovered curled up in a bush beneath it.

Other animals were there, though not many; for it now grew cold and they sought the lower levels; when the ground is covered with snow, where may food be found? But human beings there were none. Nature alone was there, Nature and her children; though had the folk who dwelt in those parts been there, still would there have been none of Nature's children, for naught else are the folk of the Border. As Nature teaches them to do, so do they; they love, they fight, they die, even as all things in Nature love, fight, and die. The strong take from the weak, for this is the law of Nature, and to kill or be killed is the law of all things.

A fluttering jay rose from a bush on a knoll, and sped calling and screaming up the valley. A startled lark flashed up from the ground and soared on high. Something had disturbed them, and presently a footstep was heard. It grew nearer, and a man topped a rise, a Pathan, and striding down the declivity he quenched

his thirst and looked around, a scowl on his face.

It was Asaf Khan, but not the Asaf Khan who had a short two weeks before ridden gaily from the house of the Khan whose Brother had fallen from a window and been killed. This man was on foot. He had neither sword nor revolver, he had not even a knife, and his clothes were dirty and torn. A strange thing this; now learn how it came to pass that Asaf Khan the bold, Asaf Khan the famous wandered a very vagabond, with ragged garments, unarmed, without even his beloved knife.

Three days did Asaf Khan ride from the Khan's house and ever the country grew poorer, the fields smaller, and the people more ragged. This was no country for profitable adventure. Adventure there might be, but were it profitable it would be so for others, not for Asaf Khan. He had much upon him to lose, but he saw nothing to gain in this wretched country. Even fame he could not win, for what fame is gained by overcoming a hungry beggar! Decidedly, this was a hungry country where it behoved a man to walk carefully if he would go far. These men had little, and would take from him who had more than they.

Therefore did Asaf Khan not go to the square within the hamlets at night, putting up instead at the mosque; for here none would meddle with him, it being sacred ground. The food was not of the best; but one cannot have all things, and he could rest well at night. This

was needful, for he must be awake and alert all day lest he be waylaid by the road.

Then came the great road, and up this he travelled two more days; but a caravan he met told him this road led direct to Kabul, and as to Kabul he had no wish to go, Asaf Khan next day left the road and went up a valley, meaning to cross the range and seek a road on the other side.

But these hills were unknown to him, nor were they like the hills in his own country; and for two days he wandered among them without finding a road. Not even a path did he find till the third day, and he lived on the ata he had in a bag strapped behind him.

But at last, on the third day of his wanderings on the mountains, he found a path, and this path he followed till evening. The sun was setting and the quick darkness falling as he reached a wider valley, and here he decided to pass the night.

But then he hesitated. At the further end he saw a column of smoke, and looking closer, discerned through the trees a gipsy encampment. At first he was minded to move on; not that he feared the gipsies—gipsies are a race of cowards and are despised by all on the Border—but he did not care to spend the night near an encampment of devil worshippers and magicians. Some of the Northern gipsies are Mussulmans; but many are devil worshippers, and all deal in secret and unholy magic.

But it grew dark, and if he went further he might not find another place to spend the night

before the light failed entirely ; so unsaddling his horse, he turned it loose to graze by the stream while he prepared his evening meal.

Hardly had be begun, than the gipsies perceived him and some children ran across to beg, for such is the custom of the gipsies. All beg, the men, the women, and the children. The children came and surrounded Asaf Khan, with shrill cries demanding a gift ; but with curses Asaf Khan drove them away, casting stones at them till they fled.

Then came a man. He begged not ; but he stood gazing at Asaf Khan in silence till Asaf Khan drove him also away with rocks. The man returned to the gipsy encampment ; and presently Asaf Khan saw they were rolling up their tents and loading their asses.

He smiled. They knew men, these gipsies, and knew which men were to be feared. One glance at Asaf Khan was enough, and they left in haste the neighbourhood of this terrible man, lest he work them ill. Asaf Khan smiled, but had he known the truth he would not have smiled. It is not good to despise others, lest in despising them a man is thrown off his guard.

Asaf Khan should have remembered that gipsies are not only beggars. They are also thieves, the cleverest thieves in any land, for it is by thieving they live. But they are cowards ; and it was of their cowardice he thought when, after eating, he placed his head on the ata bag for a pillow, and throwing his open waistcloth over him, composed himself

for the night. Asaf Khan was young in those days. Later, when the years had taught him wisdom, he learnt never to despise a foe, and never to believe a foe was gone because that foe was no longer in his sight. Here he got his first lesson.

Always was it Asaf Khan's custom when sleeping in the open to bury his waistbelt beneath him before sleeping; but this night he wore it while he slept. There were no men here, and animals do not covet money belts, therefore did he not trouble to bury it.

The ground was soft, for many pine needles formed a soft bed beneath him; but Asaf Khan's rest was troubled. Insects there were in the pine needles, many insects, and presently they entered the cloth with which he was covered, and bit him. Impatiently he hit at the place, and even once or twice rose and shook the cloth; but hardly was he asleep, than the insects started again. At last he threw the cloth aside. It was not cold, for there was no breeze in the valley and he was warmly clad. He threw the cloth aside, and now he slept well.

Too well. The sun was high in the heavens when he at last awoke and sat up. His head buzzed in a strange way and felt as if it had swelled during the night. He rubbed his forehead, and going down to the stream bathed his face. This made him feel better, and he put his hand down to his belt to take out the small comb with which he would comb his beard The belt was gone.

Asaf Khan hurried back to the place where

he had slept. In his sleep he must have unconsciously removed the belt. But the belt was not there. He snatched up the ata bag underneath which he had placed his knife and a revolver the Khan had given him. They were gone. His horse? It no longer grazed near. Following its tracks, he saw where one had walked beside the animal for a space, and then the footprints of the man disappeared.

The ground was soft here, and the print of the horse's hoofs distinct, the man must have leaped on the horse and ridden away. He hurried back to the place where he had slept, and snatched up his cloth. Something pricked his hand, and he discovered a thorn in the cloth. There were no thorn bushes where he had lain, and now all was clear to Asaf Khan. He had heard of this before; but it had passed from his mind, or never had he slept that night.

The gipsies had done this. One had lain hidden behind a bush, and had pricked him with a thorn tied tc the end of a long switch, till he, thinking it was insects that bit him, cast aside the cloth which had covered his body and head. Then had they burned some leaves of which they had the secret, and the smoke, going into his nose, had stolen away his senses so that he slept as one dead. Then had the gipsies taken his knife, his revolver, his waistbelt, his horse with its saddle and the sword in the frog at the side, and they had left him nothing save the bag of ata.

Long and loud cursed Asaf Khan; but

cursing would not restore his missing property, and he hurried to where the gipsy encampment had been. They could not travel far, for they were on foot and cumbered with baggage and animals ; he might overtake them in spite of the start they had got.

But these gipsies were cunning. He looked to see a broad trail of broken bushes and trampled leaves ; but the gipsies went otherwise. This was not the first theft they had committed, by thousands, nor was it the first time they fled from those who pursued to recover stolen property, and therefore, instead of leaving all by one way, they scattered, some going down the valley, some climbing the hills on either side.

Asaf Khan followed the trail down the valley, but ever the footprints grew less as men left and climbed the mountains, till at last Asaf Khan found no trail at all. Retracing his steps, he followed one or two trails up the mountain side ; but as soon as rocky ground came the gipsy turned aside to this ground, and the trail was lost. Returning to the place where he had slept, Asaf Khan sat down on a rock to think. He no longer cursed. Cursing would not help him in this matter, he must think.

And indeed his position was lamentable. In a strange country, in a hungry country where a man might well be murdered for the clothes he wore, without arms, without money, with naught save his clothes and the bag of ata. Truly was Asaf Khan in a desperate

strait, and it would require all the craft of which he was already becoming a master to extricate him from this difficult, this perilous position. He must get back to the main road and return to the house of the Khan. Slinging the ata bag across his shoulders, he set off.

But now was a new difficulty. Not meaning to return this way he had taken no heed to the route, and naught could he remember of it or the hills he had passed. All that day he walked, and at night cooked his food, ate, and slept. The third day he should have reached the road had he gone aright ; but on the third day there was no road, and Asaf Khan confessed to himself that he knew not where he was nor which way to take.

But a stout heart carries a man far, and that Asaf Khan had a stout heart none who knew him doubted ; and thus we find him in the mountain valley, ragged and torn, with naught in the world save a bag of ata, but with spirit unsubdued.

Throwing himself down on a soft bed of pine, he clasped his hands behind his head and gazed at the sky. The bag of ata was low, and in a few days would be empty. If he found not a place where men lived, he would starve. But having found such a place, how could he prevail on men to give him food ? Were he to meet a man alone, he might prevail on that man to give up all he had—if he but got his hands on the man's throat ere the man could draw his knife—but otherwise he would get naught save at the mosques. Even there

he would get little ; for the mullah would know he had naught and could leave no offering, so would give him but scanty fare.

It looked as if Asaf Khan's days of wandering drew to a close ; but he still lived, he still had food, and no man knows his fate till that fate be upon him. The sun was yet high in the heavens, and shouldering his bag of ata, he again set out on his quest for human habitation.

And now did Fortune once more turn her face towards him, for from the next rise he saw that the hills beyond were lower, and that further on they were still lower. On the lower hills men dwelt, and he hurried over the boulder strewn ground, anxious to get away from amongst these devils of high hills.

Beyond the next rise the hills were still lower ; and by the time evening fell Asaf Khan was proceeding cautiously. He did not wish to come unexpectedly upon a village, and should he come upon a man he would rather he saw the man first than the man see him first. But no village came in sight, and that night he again slept upon the mountains.

He was up before the sun, and again pressed on his way. Now the valleys were more open. The pines had ceased, and had given place to oak, plane, and the trees of the lower slopes. Cattle he sometimes saw upon the hillside though he saw no herders, but no hamlet did he see.

At last he passed round a spur, and there below him lay a village. It was not a large village ; but it was well protected, and the

height and thickness of the walls and the strength of the gates that were closed even though it was mid-day told Asaf Khan at once that he was in a bad country, in a country where every man not of his own village was the enemy of the man he met.

He must approach this village cautiously. His clothes were ragged and torn, and he did not seem a man of wealth ; but many in that land hide their riches under strange guise, and were he met without the village, he might be slain for the wealth he did not but might possess. Even were he not slain for his wealth, slain he would be, for he was a stranger and all strangers are enemies in the bad lands.

Slipping from bush to bush, he passed round the hill seeking a way to descend unseen to the mosque he saw without the village. Could he reach the mosque he would be safe, for he would be on holy ground and none would molest him there. Then could he rest and think what were best to do. He passed half way round the hill, and was above the mosque. Suddenly he halted. The sound of a man's voice came to his ears and he dropped behind a bush near which he was standing.

But presently he knew the one whose voice he heard was in trouble, in great trouble, and he drew nearer. Men in trouble are not much to be feared, and he might learn something of his whereabouts from this man. He moved closer till he could see into the cave.

The one who sat within the cave was dressed in the garments of a hadji, one who goes on

the hadj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. He was a man of middle age ; but his face, drawn with pain, made him appear much older. He sat in the middle of the cave, and from the way he clasped his leg, pressing it from the calf downward, Asaf Khan knew the man had injured his foot. Men who go on the hadj are the friends of all, for they are the beloved of Allah, and Asaf Khan stepped within the cave.

"Salaam o aliekaum." The usual greetings were exchanged, and Asaf Khan asked the man of his hurt.

The man groaned.

"I climbed this mountain last night, not wishing to spend the night in yonder village of which I had heard much evil, and in the darkness I fell. My ankle is broken, and also I think I am hurt inside, for twice have I been sick. Now I know not what to do. Either I shall die of my hurt, or I shall starve, for I have naught with me to eat."

The man was from Hindustan, as Asaf Khan knew from his speech, and when questioned he said he was from Delhi. He went this way rather than by sea because he had no money, and to go by sea a man must have much money. Here he could beg his way or gain his food by other means ; though of these other means he said naught to Asaf Khan at that time.

Then was Asaf Khan's heart moved with pity for the man, who went on this holy quest and who had fallen on such evil times. But a man's fate is written at his birth and none can

alter it. The man had not eaten since the previous day, and as Asaf Khan, after what he heard from the man did not care to approach the village, he there prepared some food, procuring the water from a spring that trickled from the hillside near by.

The man ate a little ; but he was sick immediately, and with his vomit was much blood. Asaf Khan looked grave, and the man, noticing the look, glanced at the vomit.

" It is even so," he said in a resigned voice, " and I shall not see the Holy City. But it is as Allah wills. Thou hast succoured me in my distress and I shall reward thee, for methinks thou hast fallen on hard times. That which I shall give thee, and that which I shall tell thee may not appear of great value in thine eyes ; yet with the help of these have I come thus far, and had I not fallen, by their help would I have reached my journey's end. May they help thee as they have helped me. Draw near that I may tell thee this secret ; for my heart faints, and I think I have but a short time to live."

Then did Asaf Khan learn from the man from Hindustan how he had come this far without money, getting food from every place to which he went. Also could he have received gifts of money, but being on a holy pilgrimage, money he would not take, leaving his food for the morrow in the hands of Allah. But presently the man grew weak, and he directed Asaf Khan to remove his garments, for Asaf Khan must now wear them ; and after Asaf

Khan had done so, the man repeated the Kalma (creed) and died. That evening Asaf Khan dug a grave, and after he had buried the man he slept within the cave. In the morning he rose, and clothed in the hadji's garments went his way.

The hadji had been tall for a man of Hindustan, though he was not so broad as Asaf Khan; but the garments were voluminous and fitted Asaf Khan, though mayhap they were tight about the shoulders; and thus clothed Asaf Khan went forth. He was now a hadji, and would travel as such till he reached the Khan's village or found the wherewithal to purchase a knife and a horse.

Then began a strange life for Asaf Khan. As a hadji he travelled, and as a hadji was he known in the places where he put up. Hadjis are holy men; for go they not on the Holy Pilgrimage? and Asaf Khan had food where-soe'er he went. But he wanted more than food, he wanted money. The hadji said he could have obtained money, but no money at first came Asaf Khan's way. For he must not ask, else would men wonder at this hadji who wished for wealth. Only as a free gift could he obtain money, and though he was given food in plenty, there seemed to be little money in that land, for none did they offer to Asaf Khan.

He soon gave up all thought of going back to the Khan's house; for to go back was ever against Asaf Khan's spirit, and also he would have to ask the horse and knife as a gift,

and to ask gifts of any man was not to Asaf Khan's liking—unless he asked the gift of a man who dared not refuse it.

From village to village he went, and everywhere was he received as a holy man. Many a time did he smile in his beard to think what kind of holy man he was; but his face was grave when he talked with men and they thought him older than his years.

Then one night came a woman to him for a love potion for her husband who had ceased to love her. Asaf Khan looked at the woman out of the corner of his eye. It was long since he had left the goldsmith's village, and the woman was fair. But he was now a holy man, and presently he gave the woman a piece of paper on which he had drawn some lines, bidding her soak the paper in water till the lines grew faint, and then give the water to her husband to drink.

The woman went away thankfully, and came back next morning with a gift. Perhaps the extra attention she showed him had moved her husband's heart, perhaps the fair one for whom he had left her had turned cruel and hard hearted; but the woman had regained her husband's love and in gratitude she brought a gift of a roast fowl and also some money. It was not much; but it was the first Asaf Khan had received, and was the first instalment of the money with which he would purchase a horse and a knife.

Now, had the woman kept the matter to herself Asaf Khan would have gone his way

from the village that day ; but she spoke of it to her friends, and when Asaf Khan was about to depart a man came to him.

This man had a daughter. She was of a marriageable age and was betrothed to a young man. The young man had lands and cattle, and the wedding day had been fixed ; but lo ! a devil had seized the maiden and now the young man grew cold and put off the wedding day. Twice a week did the devil enter into the maiden, on Wednesdays and on Sundays, and then would she beat and injure herself, also beating and injuring those of the household who sought to restrain her. Would Asaf Khan come and cure the maid ? The man had heard that Asaf Khan had given a wonderful love potion to a woman, would he not come and do something to cast the devil out of the maiden ?

Asaf Khan felt his beard. He would rather have gone on ; for though the love potion had succeeded, he knew nothing of devils. He knew much of maids, but of none possessed of devils, though many a maid who was no longer a maid had afterwards thought a devil must have possessed her when she hearkened to the words of Asaf Khan.

But he must go with this man and do something. If he succeeded, great fame would be his and also would the present be a good one. If he failed—well, he would leave the village as soon as he left the man's house.

They found the maiden lying on the floor, screaming, and striking at any one who approached ; but Asaf Khan noted that as he

entered the maiden cast a glance at him from beneath her lowered lids, and he smiled to himself. There was no madness in the look; she but shammed for some purpose known to herself.

But naught said he of this. Kneeling beside the maiden he called for some sulphur, and when it came he directed the father to hold the maiden's hands. Then did Asaf Khan burn the sulphur under the nose of the maiden so that she sneezed, choked and coughed, and the devil departed out of her.

Then was the father exceeding glad, for always did the devil remain in the maiden till sundown, and he would have sent Asaf Khan away with a gift; but there was that in the eyes of the maiden that made Asaf Khan pause.

The devil had left the maiden, he said; but it might return. He must question the maid and find out the cause of her malady, how the devil first came and what it told her when it possessed her. Only thus would the cure be for all time; else would the devil return again into the girl when Asaf Khan left.

The father looked askance at this request; for though the stranger was a holy man, he was young and this might be a plan of the devil to tempt a holy man to his undoing. But the mother interfered. When the devil seized upon the maiden, then would the father leave the house till the devil had departed, and it was she who received the blows and the scratches.

She did not want that the devil should return again, and leading Asaf Khan and the maiden to another room, she left them alone.

Then did the maiden fall at the feet of the hadji and confess all to him, begging him to help her in her distress. She loved a young man, but not the young man to whom she was betrothed, and the thought of wedding one while she loved another was bitter. Therefore had she pretended to be seized by a devil, so that the young man should withdraw from the marriage and she be free to wed the one she loved.

Asaf Khan listened to her prayer, and told her to come to the grove beside the mosque after the sun had set. He would call the young man also, the one to whom she was betrothed, and would prevail on him to free her from her promise.

The maiden promised, and Asaf Khan went forth from the chamber, and after he had received a gift from the man, he went to the mosque. There he sent for the young man, who came speedily, for he had heard from the father that the devil had been cast out and the maiden could now be wed. Too long had this wedding been delayed, and as all was prepared he would wed the maiden on the morrow. But when he heard what Asaf Khan had to say, he thought otherwise.

The devil had indeed been cast out of the girl, explained this most holy hadji ; but, as is the custom with devils, it still lingered near. Having once been cast out, in the maiden it

could not again enter ; but into another who approached near the girl it could enter, and at this saying the young man looked grave. The maiden was fair and his heart longed for her ; but suppose the devil entered into him ! Asaf Khan marked ; and then he spoke to the young man, advising him to refuse marriage with the maiden. The father could do naught, for all knew the devil had entered into the girl ; and though it had been cast out for a time, if questioned, he, the hadji, could say that it might again enter and possess her.

Then was the young man grateful to Asaf Khan, and going to his house he brought money which he gave to the hadji, begging him to say this so that the young man should not be compelled to wed this wife whose devil might some day enter into him ; and Asaf Khan promised.

At nightfall came the maiden, and to her Asaf Khan told all that had passed ; but when the maiden thanked him and would have left, he laughed.

" What I have done I can undo," he said. " I have but to tell the young man the truth, and lo ! thou art wedded to him in the morning."

Asaf Khan left that village with money enough to buy a knife ; and when in after years he passed that way, the maiden was wedded to the man of her choice and was the mother of three sons. Asaf Khan patted the head of the eldest boy and bade him grow up to be a great warrior like his father ; but he lingered not long lest some mark the resemblance.

Now, a knife is a good thing for a man to carry, and at first Asaf Khan was minded to buy him a knife with the money he had; but hadjis bear no weapons, and should a man discover by accident that Asaf Khan carried a knife, that man would wonder, and perchance grow suspicious. He would wait till he had money sufficient to buy a horse also; then would he buy both horse and knife and would throw off this disguise.

At the next village he found his fame had gone before him; for scarce was he seated at the mosque than a man came to him seeking his help. Now, this man had two wives, one the mother of a grown up son and daughter, the other young and but lately married. In the hands of the elder wife was the management of the affairs of the household, and into her hands had the man given money on the previous day bidding her purchase grain and flour. In the morning had his wife come to him saying that the money had disappeared. Someone had taken it, for it was not now in the box where she had placed it. Would the hadji come and see the house and the people, and tell him who had taken this money.

Asaf Khan felt his chin. He could not say he was unable to do this thing else would his fame depart as speedily as it had come, and with his fame would depart his hopes of obtaining money wherewith to buy a horse. He bade the man wait; when he had eaten he would go and discover the thief.

All were assembled when the man took Asaf

Khan to his house. The elder wife was there, a woman who had once been comely and who was still good-looking. The younger wife, a pretty woman hardly more than a girl. The son, a young man of some twenty years ; and the daughter, a maiden of eighteen. They were all in the main chamber, and the sound of their voices reached the ears of Asaf Khan while he was still afar. Each blamed the others for taking the money, and the noise they made was even like the noise when starlings fight together in the mating season.

They fell silent when Asaf Khan and the master of the house entered ; and after looking about him for a while, Asaf Khan drew the man aside.

" Of these two wives, for which hast thou the greater love ? "

The man looked at him in surprise. " One is old ; the other is young and pretty. What need to say more ? "

Then did Asaf Khan make use of one of the secrets he had learnt from the Hadji whose garments he wore. Taking five pieces of paper, he pretended to write on each the name of one present. He but pretended, for in those days had Asaf Khan no knowledge of letters. He pretended to write, and then folded the papers, placing in one packet some powder he had received from the hadji. Commanding the son to bring from without five stones, Asaf Khan arranged the stones in a circle, on each stone placing one of the folded pieces of paper. Then did he give the man the staff he carried

—for now that Asaf Khan was a hadji he carried a staff—and he bade the man strike the papers hard.

At first the man demurred. There were five pieces and therefore his name must be on one piece ; and this he liked not for it put him on a footing with the women of the house. But Asaf Khan angrily bade him strike or find for himself the money which was lost, and presently the man struck.

One packet he struck. Another. A third. But as he struck the fourth, the powder Asaf Khan had secretly placed in the packet exploded, and the man fell on his back. Picking himself up he would have rushed from the room, but Asaf Khan seized him by the arm, bidding him have no fear. This was harmless magic—was he not a holy hadji, and whoever heard of a hadji performing black magic ! He soothed the man, and opening the packet pretended to read the name written therein.

"H'm !" and Asaf Khan felt his chin thoughtfully. "It is now known to me who hath taken this money. But not to-day will I disclose the truth. To-morrow morning come thou to the mosque, and I will tell thee."

But the man would not then let him leave the house, begging him to stay and partake of the evening meal ; and as the food would be better than the food at the mosque, Asaf Khan stayed, going to the mosque as the sun set.

At midnight came one to Asaf Khan. Closely muffled was she, and in her hand she brought money. It was the elder wife, and she had come

to return what she had taken, begging the hadji not to disclose her fault to her husband else would he surely turn her from his house. Through jealousy she had done this thing. Her husband loved the younger wife, and she was left to a bed of loneliness ; therefore had she hidden this money, meaning to throw the blame on the younger wife and so turn her husband's love from her rival. But the holy hadji had discovered the truth, and she begged him take the money and give it to her husband in the morning, saying naught of how he had received it. Also she had brought ten rupees which she had saved out of the money her husband allowed her for household expenses, and this she gave the hadji as a gift. Asaf Khan promised, and the woman left.

Early in the morning came the man, and to him Asaf Khan told a strange tale. In the paper that burst the name he had written was changed, though what the new name was, Asaf Khan would not say. But it was the name of a demon. Knowing now who was the thief, when darkness fell had Asaf Khan repeated holy words in a certain sequence, and had summoned the one whose name was on the paper to appear before him. The demon came. It was not an evil spirit ; it had taken the money to punish the man for neglecting his first wife in favour of the second.

In the eyes of Allah are all men alike, and so in the eyes of a husband should all his wives be alike. The demon had given the money to Asaf Khan, bidding him return the money to

the man, but when giving it to warn the man that if he erred again, the money would again be taken and this time it would not be returned.

The man listened with round eyes of wonder, and received thankfully the money, ten rupees of which he gave the hadji as a present. Then went he to his home, rejoicing and telling all whom he met by the way of the wonderful thing that had occurred.

Soon the fame of the hadji was noised abroad, and a throng of women came to the mosque, some for a love charm, some for a charm against sickness, and some for a charm to procure men children.

To those who came for love charms Asaf Khan gave pieces of paper with marks, bidding them do as he had bidden the first woman to whom he had given a love charm. To those who came for charms against sickness, he gave other pieces of paper with marks, but they must drink the potion themselves. To those who came for a charm for men children he likewise gave papers, bidding them chew the paper and swallow it.

He must leave on the morrow, he said; but would some day return and stay in their village a month. Then would he give the women another charm if this one had failed, and by means of this charm he assured them they certainly would have sons. The women laughed and went their way, and next morning Asaf Khan left the village. Much money had he received in gifts, but yet not enough to buy a horse, and he went to the next village.

Here also word of his coming had gone before, and many people awaited his coming at the mosque. But wise men do not cheapen themselves in the eyes of others, lest those others despise them ; and Asaf Khan drove the people from the mosque, cursing them and threatening to leave their village and to go on to the next. When he had rested and eaten they could come, not before. All the people left save one, and as he had brought food for the hadji, Asaf Khan thanked the man for his forethought, ate the food, which was good, and asked the man what he would have.

This man's wife was possessed of a dumb devil. She was a good wife, and had borne him three strong sons ; but to none would she speak, and the man would that Asaf Khan should cast this dumb devil out of her.

Now, this matter of a dumb devil needed thinking over, so Asaf Khan bade the man go then but return in the evening with his wife. He could on his way tell the people of the village that the hadji was now rested and that they could come to him.

Again came the people, for love charms, charms against sickness, and charms for men children ; and again did Asaf Khan make marks upon pieces of paper, giving the pieces to those who asked for charms, receiving many gifts in return. All day they came, and in the evening came the man bringing with him the wife who was possessed of a dumb devil.

Asaf Khan gazed at the woman for a while. Then, lifting the eyelid of her left eye, he blew

into it. He shook his head gravely. Into the raised eyelid of the right eye he blew, and this time he looked pleased.

"I can do this thing," he said. "Let the woman observe strictly what I shall say, and then shall this dumb devil leave her."

Ordering the man to cut with his knife a lock of hair from the woman's head, Asaf Khan burnt the hair and wrapped the ashes in a piece of paper. This paper he placed under a cloth and blew upon it. Taking the packet from under the cloth he gave it to the woman, first opening the paper to see that the ashes were still there, and he bade the woman take the packet straightway to the graveyard and there place it on a grave. There must it lie all night, and in the morning must she and her husband bring it to him. The woman went away with her husband to the graveyard, and driving from the mosque the idle ones who still lingered there, Asaf Khan conversed with the mullah on holy matters till it was time to sleep.

In the morning came the man and his wife, and Asaf Khan bade the woman place the packet upon a stone and strike it with his staff. Now, when Asaf Khan placed the packet beneath the cloth, he had changed it for one he had prepared and placed there. The powder in the second packet was not the ashes of the woman's hair, but some of the powder given Asaf Khan by the hadji.

The woman struck the packet. Bang! went the powder, and away went the people who had

come to see. The husband picked himself up from the ground where he had fallen. Asaf Khan clapped his hands. "Behold! I have shot the devil."

Giving the woman a cheap looking glass, Asaf Khan bade her look into it every morning. In seven days or seven weeks the dumb devil would leave her and would never return.

For the next three days went Asaf Khan from village to village, and at every village people flocked to him for charms. But no more devils did he cast out at this time from women, though one devil, the devil of revenge and unbelief, he expelled from the heart of a man.

This man was a thief; and coming to Asaf Khan one evening, he said that he was a shikari (hunter) and that shikar had been poor of late. He wished a charm that would bring him success in his next undertaking. Asaf Khan gave him one, and the thief tried the charm that very night. He failed, was nearly caught, and vowed to meet the false hadji next day, and to make the hadji his shikar.

One brought the news to Asaf Khan, urging him to remain till the man's anger was past, but Asaf Khan smiled. If this thief thought to meet a man who would render up his goods for the asking, he was much mistaken, and next morning Asaf Khan left the village. He walked some miles, scanning each bush and rock carefully, but naught did he see of the man who had threatened to waylay and plunder him. The day was hot, and presently he seated himself by the wayside to rest.

And then, coming across the country, he saw the man; and the smile left his face. The man came not alone, nor did he bring a friend with him as Asaf Khan thought he might do; he brought six men. Now, to Asaf Khan one man would have been child's play. Even two would have been a small matter. But six! Asaf Khan felt his chin and thought. He had no knife. Decidedly, this was no time for courage, this was a time for craft. He bethought himself of the powder, and placed a little on a rock beside him, resting the end of his staff on the rock near the powder.

The man approached, jeering at the hadji and telling him what would presently be his fate, but naught did Asaf Khan answer till the thief and his companions were but a few paces away. Shifting the end of his stick slightly, Asaf Khan rose, pressing on his staff as he did so. "Whatever is done is done by the will of Allah," he said and the powder exploded.

The six companions of the thief fled in fear, and the thief threw himself on his face, begging the holy man to forgive him, for he but jested. Hadjis are holy men, and holy men should not bear malice against those who would injure them—provided the attempt fails—so Asaf Khan forgave the man, bidding him meddle no more with holy men lest a worse thing befall.

Another three days, and Asaf Khan had nearly enough money to purchase a horse. Then would he throw off this disguise and ride

as he had ridden before. He had no gun, nor had he a sword ; but let him have a knife and a horse and it would not be long ere he had a sword and a gun also. Many charms gave he, but for charms the gifts are small and he looked eagerly for a devil to cast out. But devils were few in that part, and for three days no one came to him asking him to cast out a devil. But on the evening of the third day one came.

This man's wife had a devil. At times she was well ; but at other times the devil would possess her and she would scream, laugh, and attack all who were near her. Especially would this devil come were the woman angered or crossed in a wish ; and then it would compel her to do wicked deeds, such as striking her own husband and casting things at him. He showed Asaf Khan a lump the size of an egg on the side of his head.

Now this meant good money, for no man likes lumps on his head, and the man would make a good gift if the devil were cast out of his wife. Asaf Khan thought for some time, feeling his chin and gazing at the ground. He had little of the powder left, and this little would he keep for shikaris. Some other means must he use to cast out this devil. He must think this matter over, and he bade the man come again in an hour.

In an hour the man came, and Asaf Khan went with him to his house. Screams issued from the courtyard as they approached, and the man stopped.

"The devil hath again possessed her," he said. "Let us wait, and approach the house after the devil has departed."

But Asaf Khan would not have it so. Leading the way, he stole softly to the gate of the courtyard and peered within. A woman sat on a bedstead in the centre of the courtyard, her hair loosened and hanging about her shoulders, and as she screamed she hurled things at those who ventured from the door of the house.

Asaf Khan passed his hand across his mouth to hide a smile. It was as he had thought. The man was a weak fool. This was but an angry woman, and the devil that possessed her was the devil called temper. He would soon cast out this devil. Bidding the man enter the courtyard, he drew aside from the gate so that the woman should not see him.

At first the man refused. "Nay," he said. "Enter thou first and expel this devil; then will I enter," and he felt the lump on the side of his head.

But Asaf Khan turned away, saying that if the man would not do as he was bid he could cure his wife himself. In great alarm the man seized hold of the skirt of the hadji's garment, begging him not to go, and at last he agreed to do as Asaf Khan bid.

"Go thou into the courtyard," said Asaf Khan, "and approach thy wife from the front. Look not to any other place, and especially guard thine eyes from turning to me as I enter. Do as I bid, and the devil will leave thy wife."

With trembling hands the man unfastened the gate of the courtyard and passed within, and Asaf Khan, slipping round to the back, peeped over the wall. The man approached his wife slowly, ready to turn and flee in a moment ; but the woman had stopped screaming. and this encouraged the man. Slowly he advanced till he stood but a few paces from the bedstead, and Asaf Khan prepared him for the spring that should carry him over the wall and into the courtyard.

Suddenly the woman screamed and Asaf Khan was over the wall. The woman raised her hand and cast a stone which she had hidden in her garments. It struck the man on the head so that next day he had a lump on either side, and then Asaf Khan's hands were about the woman's throat.

" Now shall I choke this devil out of thee! " he said between his teeth. " If it slay thee before it leave thee, what matter ? It will be the work of the evil one, not my doing."

Then came a look of great fear into the woman's eyes, and she looked at Asaf Khan imploringly. But she could not speak, for her throat was closed by the pressure of those steel-like hands.

Asaf Khan marked the look in the woman's eyes, and presently he relaxed his grasp so that she could breathe.

" Hath the devil left thee ? " he asked harshly.

The woman nodded, for not yet could she speak.

"And will it ever return?"

The woman shook her head.

"It is good," and Asaf Khan released the woman. "But know," he continued threateningly, "that next time will I choke the devil out of thee so that it cannot return if it would."

Calling the man, who had fled from the courtyard, Asaf Khan showed him his wife from whom the devil was now departed, and into whom it would enter no more.

In the morning the hadji left the village, and never more was he seen of men; for Asaf Khan had thrown aside the hadji's garments and bought him a horse and a knife and now rode forth as Asaf Khan, the warrior.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VENGEANCE OF ASAF KHAN

ASAF KHAN reined in his steed as he topped the hill, and shading his eyes with his hand from the rays of the setting sun, gazed across the valley before him. A knife was in his belt, a sword swung by his side, and in his belt on the other side was a revolver. How he got the sword and the revolver was known to him and to the men from whom he took them ; though of the manner of their taking those from whom he took would tell no man inasmuch as they no longer walked this earth.

It was a fair country he looked upon ; but the group of buildings crowning a mound in the valley was new to him in those days, and he studied it with much interest. Of such he had heard, and he knew he was now on the border of Afghanistan, perchance within that country.

It was a small fort with high walls and narrow

gate, and in the centre of the fort stood a tall tower, surrounded by what appeared to be living-rooms. Around the fort, nestling up against the walls, were a number of rude houses, the houses of those who sought the protection of the one who dwelt within the fort.

This fort, or fortified house was the dwelling of the Khan of that part; for in these lands Khans often lived in houses apart from the village, with many retainers in their houses; and from their forts they ruled the surrounding country which they claimed for their own, taking tribute in kind and money from the people. In return they and their retainers protected the common folk from raiders and robbers, or led a foray into the territory of some neighbouring Khan.

Now, these Khans are not like the Khans of the Border, but are a class apart, looking upon themselves as kings, and equals of the Amir except in the strength of their armies; and Asaf Khan hesitated whether to go to the house of the Khan, or go to the village he saw lying further along the valley.

Here he would be unknown, for not then had his fame grown as it grew in after years, and his name was known in but a few parts. In the eyes of this Khan he would be but a common man, and the Khan might be a haughty man who would speak as a superior and put Asaf Khan with his retainers. This, Asaf

Khan would not brook, for his spirit was high and he considered himself the equal of any man, the superior of most.

And then the sound of galloping hoofs smote upon his ear and he looked round.

Two horses raced towards him, the riders bent low over the horses' necks, and behind them raced two other horses. The first two horses were small, hardly more than ponies, and the riders appeared to be short in stature; but the two who followed were of full size, both horses and riders, and they gained steadily upon the first two.

The two in front saw him, and one, raising his head, called; though as they were still afar Asaf Khan knew not what was called. As the first galloped away, they would have passed some distance from him, but now they turned their horses' heads and galloped towards him, calling as they came.

Asaf Khan fingered his knife and waited. The second two must be in pursuit of the first two. He had no gun; if he had one, a moving man makes a bad target, and if these men would capture those whom they pursued, they must pass close to him. His hand slipped to the butt of his revolver. Who fled and who pursued he knew not; but it was ever the weaker side that Asaf Khan favoured, for thus was to be gained much honour.

The ones who followed now saw Asaf Khan, and one swung his horse close to his com-

panion's, though they checked not their speed. Evidently they talked. Presently one loosened a rifle that hung behind him, and dropping his reins for a moment, raised the rifle and fired.

But the aim from the back of a galloping horse is not good, and the bullet went wide. On came the pursued, and on came the pursuers. Now Asaf Khan could see that those in front were two boys, little more than children, and also he could now hear what they called.

"If thou would'st have much wealth, save us from these men!"

So these were the sons of some great man, probably the Khan of that place. Asaf Khan smiled grimly; sometimes even the sons of great men had cause to fear. Another shot rang out, and this time the bullet whistled past Asaf Khan's ear. But he raised not the hand in which he held concealed the revolver. He would that these men should think he had but a sword, for then would they not fear to pass close.

On they came, pursuers and pursued, and presently the boys swept past him. His hand closed more firmly over his revolver butt, and then the men were upon him. In an instant his hand was withdrawn, the revolver raised, and one of the men reeled in his saddle. The other man was upon him; but now Asaf Khan's sword was in his hand.

The man lunged at Asaf Khan as he passed,

and Asaf Khan in turn leant forward and lunged ; but the horse of the man swerved and both missed. The quarry forgotten, the man reined in his steed, and after a glance at his companion who had fallen and now lay prone on the ground, he forced his steed on Asaf Khan.

The man was a good swordsman and looked for an easy victory ; but in this he was mistaken, for Asaf Khan was as good, was better than he. Sword clashed on sword as one struck and the other guarded, for the men of the East use not the point, their swords being curved they strike with the blade only. Loud rang the sound of tempered steel upon tempered steel ; and then did the man a deed which Asaf Khan or any brave man would scorn to do, he struck at the neck of Asaf Khan's horse. Fair descended the blow, and as the horse staggered the man uttered a cry of triumph. His foe would now be dismounted and at his mercy.

Asaf Khan knew his horse was sorely wounded and must soon fall. Gathering his feet up under him, he pricked his animal with the point of his sword so that it bounded forward. In an instant Asaf Khan's feet were in the saddle and he had sprung. Too late the man saw what was coming. When Asaf Khan's horse bounded, the man tried to swerve his horse out of the way lest it be thrown to the ground, and thus was his back turned as Asaf Khan leaped. Full upon the man's back leaped Asaf Khan, and the next moment his

shortened sword passed through the man's body. With a groan the man sank to the earth, and Asaf Khan sat alone on the horse.

He looked around. His own horse had fallen, a riderless horse galloped over the plain, and in the distance, near the walls of the Khan's fort, one of the boys bent low over his pony's neck. But the other boy had reined in a bare hundred yards away, and now he rode up to Asaf Khan.

"Bravely done, stranger. My father shall thank and reward thee for this day's work."

Asaf Khan gazed curiously at the boy, and saw that he had been mistaken. This was no boy, this was a girl. Was the other a girl also, or had the girl proved the better boy. She was young, she could not have been more than fourteen, and she wore the dress of a boy; but her hair was long and had slipped from beneath her cap so that it streamed about her shoulders.

Asaf Khan pursed up his lips and looked at the girl with disapproving eyes. This girl was far too old to go abroad unveiled. At the age of ten should the girl of a good house take the veil, and this girl was far past ten. He remembered the girl's words as the two fugitives swept past, and he doubted not it was she who had called to him.

"Thou art the daughter of the Khan. What does the daughter of the Khan so far from her home?"

"I and my brother rode forth this day fearing naught," replied the girl, "for often we ride thus. But these men came upon us and would have seized us. But for thee we might have been taken. Come to my father, for he loves his children dearly and will reward well the man who has saved them from his enemy."

Asaf Khan's brows met in a frown. In those days he loved not wealth for wealth's sake. A good horse under him and a good weapon in his hand was all he asked for, with perchance enough in his waistbelt to buy another horse should he lose the one he was riding. If he wanted more he could take it. This continual talk of reward angered him. Did the maiden think he was one of those who wander the land willing to sell their swords to the highest bidder!

"I go to the village," he said gruffly. "Had I known it was a girl, perchance I had stood aside. A girl more or less matters little, and a shameless girl who rides unveiled matters less. The life of a brave man is a great thing, and the man whom I slew with my sword was a brave man else had he not stood up against Asaf Khan."

This Asaf Khan said that all should know it was Asaf Khan who had stood up against the two men; for though he would not go to the house of the Khan, he would that his name should be known. Always was it Asaf Khan's

care that when he had done a brave deed men should know who had done it, for thus would his name and fame go forth over all the land.

The girl smiled saucily when he called her shameless.

"Art thou a hermit?" she asked cheekily, "that the sight of a girl's face offends thee? I have heard that hermits shun girls and women, though I see no reason for such foolishness. I am a girl because I wear my hair long, and therefore must I go veiled. If I cut my hair, lo! I am a boy and may go with my face uncovered. Did not my father restrain me I would cut my hair and be a boy this day. But farewell. If thou wilt not come to the Khan's house, go thou to the village where a present will be sent to thee."

Again was Asaf Khan angered. He could not understand this boy and girl talk; but he understood the last part. This girl offered payment for the service he had done. Did she think him one of her servants!

"Go to thy home, thou shameless one," he said. "Cover thy face as a decent maiden should, and sit with the women at thy embroidery!" Swinging round his horse, he cantered off in the direction of the village.

The village, a large one, lay about a mile from the house of the Khan; and entering it, Asaf Khan sought a place where he might stable his horse and himself rest till the morrow. To the mosque he went not, for he had money

in his belt, money which he had got when he got the sword and the revolver ; and going to the serai, he chose a chamber for himself and saw to the wants of his horse.

He was glad to see that he had not lost by the exchange of steeds. The one he had ridden was a good one ; but this was a better and looked to be the horse of some wealthy man, perchance it belonged to the master of the man he had slain.

No eating house is there in a serai ; but in many there is a man who will cook food for travellers, and to this man Asaf Khan gave money bidding him what to prepare. The food was soon ready, and Asaf Khan ate, afterwards resting on the charpoy (string bedstead) which he had drawn from his room and placed under the shade of a tree in the open space of the serai.

To him presently came a man. This man entered the serai, and going to two or three who sat without their rooms asked them if any among them was named Asaf Khan. They shook their heads, and the man came across to the serai.

"Salaam o aliekaum. I seek one Asaf Khan."

"Aliekaum i salaam. My name is Asaf Khan ; but I know thee not."

"I come from the Khan. He calls thee. Long have I sought thee in the village, so come quickly for the Khan is quick to anger and brooks not delay."

Asaf Khan smiled. "I have not yet rested," he said carelessly. "Go tell thy Khan that when I have rested, I may come."

The man stared. This was a strange answer to bear to his Khan, an answer moreover that he dare not bear. Again he urged Asaf Khan to come, even begged him to come; but Asaf Khan's reply was ever the same, when he was rested he might come. At last the man left the serai. He must return to his master, else would the Khan think him remiss; but it was not Asaf Khan's message he gave the Khan. The stranger, he said, had travelled far. He rested but while his horse ate, then would he hasten to throw himself at the feet of the Khan.

But night fell and no Asaf Khan came to the house of the Khan, so that the Khan was wroth and sent the man again to Asaf Khan bidding him come at once; for Khans love not to be crossed in their wills.

Asaf Khan had risen. He had rubbed down and fed his horse, and now sat eating the morning meal. He smiled when he saw the man enter the serai, but pretended not to see him. What is easily got is little valued. It is that which is hard to obtain we value most.

The man hurried to Asaf Khan. "Thou didst not come! Why? The Khan is wroth!"

"With me or with thee?"

The man stared. "With both."

"Then let his anger cool," and Asaf Khan called for a huqa (pipe).

The man wrung his hands. "Thou fearest not the Khan for thou art a brave man, and perchance thou ridest forth to another place. But I am here, and on me will the anger of the Khan fall!"

Now, had the man known Asaf Khan from childhood he could not have chosen his words better. Never would Asaf Khan that another should suffer for what he had done, and he removed the stem of the huqa from his mouth.

"Ride thou to thy Khan," he said, "and tell him that I come."

"So didst thou say last night. I stay and go with thee."

Asaf Khan turned slowly and looked at the man. Naught did he say, but at the look the man's heart turned to water and he backed hastily.

"Go, and say that I come," and Asaf Khan frowned.

The man stood still further away. "Thou wilt surely come?"

"I have said."

But still the man went not, and Asaf Khan waxed wroth. Seizing a stone he hurled it at the man and the man fled. But he feared to return again to the Khan without this man, lest again the man not come; so he waited without the gate of the serai, peeping within, till he saw Asaf Khan saddle his horse. Re-

moving without the gate, he waited till Asaf Khan rode forth, and then seeing that this insolent man would indeed go to the Khan, he sped on ahead to say that the man came. The man had been taken suddenly ill after eating and had been unable to come the previous evening.

Asaf Khan rode to the gate of the fort, and there the gatekeeper would have had him dismount ; but Asaf Khan pressed his heels into his horse's sides, and pushing past the man rode into the courtyard. There one took his horse while another went within to say that the stranger had come, and craved an audience with the Khan.

Asaf Khan looked curiously at the house. It really consisted of a number of rooms built round a square tower, and he shook his head. The tower was strong and as a last resort the defenders could take refuge there, but the tower might prove a death trap instead of a refuge. The enemy could set fire to the rooms, and then those within the tower must come forth or be roasted alive.

Another thing about this fort was not to his liking. The dwelling chambers, which were in two storeys, were about the two sides of the tower and the back ; but in front was nothing. Therefore, should the enemy succeed in scaling the walls or bursting through the gate, the front of the tower lay open to their attack. The whole, the tower, the rooms,

and the protecting wall were all built of dressed stone, and this was the only thing to Asaf Khan's liking. It is easy to remove undressed stones from a wall and thus gain entrance, but to remove dressed stone is another matter. But one beckoned him from the door, and he entered.

The Khan was seated on a rug at the end of a spacious chamber, and beside him, one on either side, sat the two children whom Asaf Khan had saved, the second of whom Asaf Khan now saw to be a boy of twelve. The Khan was a jovial looking man of about forty, with blue eyes and a great brown beard; but he looked like one with a hasty temper, and also like one too much given to taking his ease. But thus it always is with Khans. In their young manhood they are brave and go forth with their men on many a wild foray; but presently they leave these pursuits and give themselves overmuch to the pleasure of the table and women.

"Welcome," the Khan said heartily as Asaf Khan entered. "My children have told me how thou didst save them, and I would reward thee for the service thou hast done me. I sent for thee last night, but thou wert ill and could not come."

No word of thanks, merely the promise of a reward. Asaf Khan's brow grew dark.

"I was not ill," he said curtly. "I cared not to come."

The Khan's eyes opened in a wide stare. "But—but—so did the man I sent but now tell me."

"Thy man is a liar," said Asaf Khan grimly. "I was not ill, nor did I tell him I was ill. Yesterday I told him I might come; but after he left my mind changed, and instead of coming I took mine ease in the serai."

The Khan's face grew red with indignation at the words and bearing of this saucy one who stood before him. "Then why comest thou now?" he asked explosively.

Asaf Khan shrugged his shoulders. "Allah knows. It will serve to pass an idle hour. I tarry at the village till the morrow."

Then was the Khan exceeding wroth. Never had he heard such words! All men approached him humbly, but this insolent one spoke to him as if he, the Khan, was a thing of little moment, a man whose company would serve to pass an idle hour! He almost choked with anger; for he was of a full body, and the blood went easily to his head.

The girl marked her father's rising anger, and spoke.

"This man saved thy children yesterday, my father," she whispered.

With an effort the Khan calmed himself; but when he spoke he could not but show some anger.

"Art thou the son of the Amir travelling in disguise through our land!"

Asaf Khan smiled. "Be not wroth, O worthy Khan," he said. "Son of no Amir am I, yet I am the equal of any son of Amir for I am a Man. But let it be peace between me and thee, and if thou hast aught to say, say it and let me begone. But speak not of reward. It was not for a reward I saved thy children; and the talk of a reward for a deed any brave man would have done sounds ill in mine ears."

The Khan gazed at Asaf Khan in silence for some minutes. This was in truth a strange man. This man had done a great service for a Khan, but unlike other men, who ask rewards for the slightest service, this man asked no reward for his great service—said the talk of reward sounded ill in his ears! Motioning his men to spread a carpet before him, he bade Asaf Khan be seated. "I would speak further with thee," he said, "for thou art not like other men I have met."

Now that his anger was past, the Khan found Asaf Khan much to his liking; for Asaf Khan had a silver tongue that could beguile both men and women. Long they talked, and the more they talked, the more did the Khan like this stranger, so that he bade Asaf Khan bring his things from the serai and dwell in the fort for as long as he should stay in this place.

Asaf Khan felt his chin. He had travelled far, staying not more than one day in any one place, and a week here would be a pleasant

break in his travels. And in the house of the Khan he would live in great comfort. He thanked the Khan and accepted.

For six days dwelt Asaf Khan in the house of this Khan. He would have stayed longer, but that occurred which caused him to leave, which sent him forth on an errand of blood. He had rooms given him near the Khan's rooms, and always they two were together, for the Khan had a great liking for Asaf Khan, who reminded him of the days when he also was a young man with the world before him. Sometimes they went out hawking, sometimes they played chess, sometimes they sat and talked.

Asaf Khan soon learnt that the Khan had an enemy, an enemy of generations, and it was this enemy whom the Khan blamed for the attempt on his son and daughter. Often had the children ridden forth alone, and before this day had none molested them; but word of their riding forth must have reached this enemy, and therefore had he sent his men to seize them and bear them away.

And then one day Asaf Khan spoke to the Khan of a matter that had been on his mind from the first. It was the matter of the girl. The father saw not how his child was ceasing to be a child and was becoming a woman, someone should open his eyes. Each day was Asaf Khan offended by the sight of this unveiled maid, and at last he remonstrated with the Khan.

The Khan smiled. "In some things I am weak," he confessed, "and in the matter of this daughter, the child of a wife I loved dearly and who now is dead, I am weak as water. Her mother died at her birth, and I had the child—she was then my only child and was the child of the woman I loved—taken to my own chambers. There has she dwelt since that day, never going to the women's apartments; for I married again, and I think my son's mother has no love for the girl. Poison is easy to give, and it is safer that the girl go not there. She hath a small chamber next to mine, and there she dwells. A woman waits upon her; but this woman is both deaf and dumb, and therefore hath a strange thing come to pass.

"The girl," and the Khan smiled, "thinks men and women alike. She thinks it is but that one wears long hair, while the hair of the other is cut short; for thus, when one day she pressed me with questions, knowing not what to say, I answered."

Then did Asaf Khan remember what the girl had said, and he smiled also. The girl would some day have a rude awakening. But to argue with a weak father is foolishness, and he said no more to the Khan.

This girl vexed Asaf Khan greatly. He could not be wroth with her, for she was a girl and little more than a child; so he tried to avoid her. But the girl would not be denied.

Perhaps it was sex whispering in her heart, perhaps it was mere girlish wilfulness—because she saw he would avoid her—but wherever Asaf Khan went, there went the girl. Oft-times Asaf Khan spoke to her harshly, bidding her begone to her sewing and embroidery; but the girl only laughed.

"It is true I am a maid," she said, "for my father hath so ordered; but not always shall I be a maid. Some day will I prevail on him to allow me to cut my hair, and then I will be a boy. What manner of boy would I be if I sat all day, sewing and working strange figures in silk! Nay. I will go where I will and do as I wish."

There was no gainsaying the girl, and when they went hawking, she went also. When they sat at chess, she sat near. When Asaf Khan and her brother rode round the fort or down to the village, she led the way.

At last Asaf Khan ceased to remonstrate with her, and to his great surprise there sprang up in his heart a warm feeling for this independent child. Her spirit was so like his own that he could not but admire her; but still, the sight of her unveiled face gave him a feeling of shame, and he asked her to cover her face.

The girl tossed her head. "I will not! Again this foolish talk! And I thought thee a man of wisdom! Yet always is thy speech thus! If my father would but let me cut my

hair, then could I do as I like ; but because my hair is long, I must not do this and I must not do that ! ”

Asaf Khan smiled grimly. “ It is more than a matter of hair. If I return this way some three years hence, then, if before that time no one else hath taught thee, I will myself teach thee that it is more than a matter of cutting the hair.”

It was the sixth day of Asaf Khan’s stay, and at dawn he went forth with a dozen men, taking with him his rifle and his knife. Now, always when Asaf Khan rode forth from a place was it his custom to take with him all the ammunition he possessed ; for who can say what is written ? It might be that he would not again return to that place, for all is as Allah wills. Therefore did he on this day take with him thirty cartridges for his rifle, the rifle he had bought from a man in the Khan’s house, and twenty cartridges for his revolver. He took not his sword, for a sword he thought a small matter, and they went on a hunt where a sword would be in the way.

To the high hills they went, to the high hills that lay to the west, for the Khan would have bears’ skins for the winter. On these hills were many bears, and yearly went the men forth to bring skins, that were afterwards cured and made into warm coverings for the winter.

Many miles away were the hills, and it was

not till evening that the hunters reached them. At the foot they rested, and in the morning, leaving their horses in charge of some, the rest climbed the hill. In a line they went up, in a line spread along the hillside, for then would a bear that was roused be unable to escape by running to the right or the left. It must run up the hill, and this it would not do for long. Fatigue would make it wroth, and then it would turn on its pursuers and be slain.

This hunting was not much to Asaf Khan's liking. Rather would he have gone after the bear with a knife as sometimes the men of his village did ; but he must do as the others did, and so he walked in the line, shooting when he saw a bear, till they reached the top of the hill.

He would have descended the other side, but the men restrained him. An enemy lived on that side, and therefore must not they descend lest they be seen and fired upon. The hunt had served two purposes. They had four skins, and all the bears had been driven to the other side of the range, where they would stay destroying the sheep and crops of the villagers till they were again driven to this side.

The sun was now dropping, so, removing the skins from the bears they had slain, the men returned to the foot of the mountain where they spent the night, starting at dawn for the Khan's house.

They rode fast, and it wanted two full hours to sunset as they approached the village. A rise had hidden the Khan's house from view; but before the village was high ground, and reaching this they drew rein in surprise and terror. The Khan's house was a blackened ruin. Who had done this! Turning to the right, they galloped to the village to learn how this dreadful thing had come to pass.

But Asaf Khan went not with them. Clapping his heels to his horse's sides he raced to the fort. The horse slacked on a rise, and he pricked it savagely with his knife. On he flew, and now he was at the gate. Throwing himself from his steed almost before it stopped, he rushed into the courtyard.

No living men were there. Dead men lay about, the bodies of men of the Khan's household, and the bodies of strangers, but none were there who lived. One side of the house was burnt and blackened, but the fire had died down without reaching the other side, nor was the tower damaged. The great door of the tower stood open, and Asaf Khan strode within, stepping over the bodies of more dead men as he entered. Within lay the body of the Khan, his dead son behind him, and behind them on the staircase lay more dead men.

The dead Khan's sword lay beside him, and taking it in his hand Asaf Khan picked his way up the staircase. He found near the top more dead men, and with them dead women.

Up he went, till he reached the highest chamber. Here were no dead and he would have turned to descend ; but a sound made him look to a corner and he beheld the crouched figure of a girl, the daughter of the Khan. In a corner she crouched, moaning, and Asaf Khan's heart was filled with a great pity.

" Alas ! " he said, and at his voice the maiden looked up.

A moment she gazed at him with unseeing eyes, but then the light of reason returned and she started to her feet. With hands wrung together and face white and drawn she gazed at him for a space, and then with a great cry started forward.

" They came ! " she cried in a dreadful voice. " The men thought they were but travellers riding to the village. But suddenly they turned and raced for the gate, bursting in before any could close it, and then did they begin to slay. All the men in the courtyard they slew ; though some of the Khan's men were armed and slew many ere they were themselves slain.

" My father hurried with me and my brother to the tower, some of our men with us ; but because to come from the rooms to the tower we had to pass through the courtyard, we had to fight our way, and there more were slain. In the tower my father and those who were left kept the door, but they could not close it, and one by one were they slain till none remained.

"Then did those men slay all the women in the house. But me they slew not—would that they had! For, O Asaf Khan, I know thy words to be true; the difference between man and woman is more than the cutting of hair. And now, O Asaf Khan, one favour I ask of thee," and tearing open her robe at the bosom she threw wide her arms. "My father is dead, my brother is dead, and I am a thing of shame. All day have I sought to slay myself but cannot. Slay me, O Asaf Khan, and I will bless thee as I die!"

Then was Asaf Khan's heart moved with such pity as never had he felt before or ever would feel again. Her father dead, her brother dead, herself a thing of shame, how could the maid live! It were better that she died. This was her father's sword, and so would her father in mercy have done. Turning away his eyes Asaf Khan thrust. Deep in the maiden's breast went the sword, and she sank to the ground. "Thanks, O Asaf Khan," she said, and died.

Then turned Asaf Khan hastily from the room and descended the stairs. His work was not yet done, for those who had done this thing still lived. In a room near the gate he found a bag of ata, and leaping on his horse he galloped to the place where he had first seen the children, for the men had that day come from this direction, and from this direction they may have come again. Perchance their country lay this way.

He was not mistaken. Clear on the ground was the track of men, of many who went to the house of the Khan, and of the few who returned ; for though these men had triumphed, dearly had they paid for their victory. The tracks were of men on foot, and Asaf Khan followed them till the sun set.

He was up before dawn, and at the first grey light he started. He was mounted while these men were on foot, and he doubted not that he would overtake them, if not that day, on the next. The house of the Khan who had sent them lay ten days off, and he would have many days in which to work his will upon these men.

There were not many in the party, for the Khan and his men had fought well and had accounted for many. There could not be more than nine or ten men in the gang, and though this is a fair number for one man to match himself against, guile will often reduce the odds and succeed where mere courage would fail. For that these men should never return to their homes Asaf Khan was resolved. They must all die, and then would none be left to publish the girl's shame, for those who found the bodies in the house of the Khan would think the girl had perished with the rest of the women.

The sun was setting on the third day when in the distance Asaf Khan saw the men he followed. Presently they camped, and Asaf

Khan rode up to them, a smile of greeting on his face.

"Salaam o aliekaum. I be a stranger in this country. Can'st direct me to a village?"

The leader of the gang looked at him sharply. This was a man of parts. That he was a warrior could be seen at a glance. The Khan had lost many men in this raid and would be thankful to obtain a man such as this stranger.

"Aliekaum i salaam," he replied cordially. "Whence comest thou, and where goest?"

Asaf Khan pointed to the hills. "I come from beyond those. I come from a far land, and I go to a Khan who dwells, so I have been told, beyond the hills in front. But on horseback one who knoweth not the way may not climb hills, and therefore I seek another way."

"It is good," and the man nodded his head. "We also go to that Khan, for we be his men. Come thou with us."

"It is good," and Asaf Khan slipped from his horse. Tethering the animal to a tree stump, he seated himself beside the men, and they talked while the evening meal was being prepared.

He was a good talker was Asaf Khan, and the men were glad he was of their party; for he told them many tales, and the time passed merrily.

Next day they left the valley and began to ascend the mountains by a winding path.

Narrow was this path and steep the hill below it, so that men walked singly, one after the other, and last of all came Asaf Khan leading his horse. Till mid-day they descended, and then they rested for an hour, for the way before them was even more steep.

"Doth this Khan of thine live in the clouds?" quoth Asaf Khan, and the leader laughed, assuring Asaf Khan that their land was in a fertile valley of which these hills were but the protecting wall.

Again they started, and now the way was more winding and narrow, with sides almost straight down. Presently Asaf Khan walked faster, till he almost trod on the heels of the man he followed.

The man turned; but ere he could speak, Asaf Khan hurled him from the path. Down hurled the man, and the others turned in alarm. Asaf Khan had stepped back a couple of paces, and now pointed to the place where the man had gone over, explaining how the unfortunate man had stepped too near the edge which had given way beneath his feet.

Such accidents are not uncommon on the hills, and no more would the men have thought of it; but as the man fell he screamed once, and his scream sounded as if he called the word "traitor."

Now, this was a strange thing for a man to call as he fell to his death. Had he called on the name of Allah, had he screamed for help

they could have understood ; but that he should call out the word " traitor " was exceeding strange.

But the man was gone, they were yet far from home, and they could not linger here wondering. They started, and Asaf Khan again breathed freely. Almost had he been discovered ; but none suspected him, and he could proceed with the vengeance he had sworn to take upon these men. There had been nine, now there were eight, soon there would be less. But no more men must he cast from the path, else might they wonder why only the man who walked immediately before the stranger fell from the path, while the rest walked in safety.

They camped early this day, for they had climbed since morning and a man cannot walk over the hills as he walks over a plain ; though on the Border can many men walk further over the hills than most men can walk over a plain. They camped early, and Asaf Khan, saying that he had dropped some cartridges and would look for them, returned by the way they had come.

On the Border cartridges are precious, and the men wondered not at his going back. But it was not for fallen cartridges that Asaf Khan returned, his reason was another. Reaching the place where the man had fallen, he tied his horse to a tree and looked for a way to descend. He found one, a difficult way, but

Asaf Khan was of the mountains and could almost have climbed down the side of a house. In a quarter of an hour he reached the bottom and stood beside the dead man. Stooping over the body, with his sharp knife he mutilated it, and making a small fire, threw into it that which he had cut from the body.

Now was his vengeance on this man complete. One of these men, he knew not which, had brought black shame upon the maiden. Now in their turn would black shame be their portion ; for on the last day they would rise no men, nor could they ever enjoy the delights of Paradise.

It took him half an hour to climb the hill, and he returned to the men, a few loose cartridges in his hand.

Asaf Khan smiled grimly as he lay down to sleep that night. Great friends had he and the men become, and they accepted him as a comrade and one of themselves. Even the leader, though he was a shrewd man, doubted not the good faith of this stranger with the silver tongue.

But now he must think of some other plan. No more men must he cast over, he must think of another way to slay them. Long he thought that night ; and next day while they walk d his eyes were ever on the hillside above. Presently he saw that which he sought. It was near mid-day, and he proposed a rest to which the others gladly agreed, and while

they rested he sought grass for his horse on the hillside, for on and near the path was no grass. Here was little, but further back there was grass in abundance, and to this place he went, telling the men not to wait should he be long in returning. He could follow the path, and he wished to gather much grass so that there should be some for his horse at night.

To the place where the grass was abundant he went, but he stayed not there. Tying his horse to a tree, he crept above the path, hidden from sight by a spur he had noted. On he crept, till at last he crouched above the place where the men rested. Then did Asaf Khan choose a boulder. One that was round and of great size did he choose, and one moreover that was of hard rock that would not break and scatter. Loosening it from its bed, he put forth all his strength and the boulder moved. Another mighty heave, and it began to roll. Faster it moved, and now Asaf Khan knew it would not stop. Speeding to the place where he had left his horse, he began to cut grass.

At first he heard nothing. He was too far to hear the boulder, nor did he think he would hear from where he was the cries of the men; but presently he heard a rumble and knew the boulder was past the path and was now descending in great bounds to the valley, carrying with it a vast mass of the hillside it had displaced in its passage. He hoped some of the men

accompanied it ; but it would not be wise to go and look, else might the men wonder why he, who had said he would bring much grass, came back with little, and wonder give rise to suspicion. But he kept his eye on the path by which he had come.

Presently he heard footsteps and one of the men came into view. Asaf Khan rose and stretched himself.

"I have not yet finished," he said, "as I would take plenty. Go you on, and when I have cut sufficient grass I will follow."

It was the leader of the band, and he looked at Asaf Khan suspiciously. Had this man been there cutting grass all the time? They knew nothing of this stranger who had joined their party. Yesterday one of their comrades, a man used to the hills, had slipped from the path and been killed—and this man had been close. Now this man was absent from their sight, and lo! a great boulder descended, killing two.

But Asaf Khan had now finished cutting grass, and rolling up the bundle he bade the other lead the way.

"A stone but just now fell from above," said the man, "and two of my men are slain. Knowest thou aught of this boulder?"

Asaf Khan threw down the bundle of grass, and an angry flush came to his face.

"What means this question?" and his hand dropped to the hilt of his knife. "Dost mean

that I had aught to do with the falling of this boulder of which I have just learned ? ”

The man was not convinced, and he fingered the rifle he held. But when he saw that Asaf Khan's rifle had also slipped round to the front, he hesitated. It might be that after all the man had done naught. Still, this might be a secret enemy, and he roughly bade Asaf Khan go his own way. They wanted no more of his company, for since he had joined them had ill luck been theirs. Nor would they take him to their Khan. He could come afterwards if he would, but with them he would not go.

Asaf Khan laughed harshly. “ There be strange folk in these parts,” he said, “ folk who know not their own minds. First ye would take me to your Khan, now ye will not. But to your Khan shall I go ; and because I have a horse I shall reach the house of thy Khan before thee. Then shall I tell him how eager his servants are to procure for him good men and true.”

For a moment the man hesitated. The stranger's words rang true, and he might have had nothing to do with the stone ; but the mysterious events of the past two days had disturbed the man, and with another curt order to Asaf Khan to take his own way, he returned to his party.

For half an hour did Asaf Khan wait there, and then, when he knew the men had gone on their way, for now they feared and would

travel fast, he followed the path. He soon reached the place where the two men had been killed by the boulder, and saw by the disturbed ground where their companions had buried them. They were not buried deep, for the men had been in haste, and in a short time Asaf Khan had dug up the bodies, treated them as he had treated the body of the first man, and while the flames blazed merrily he followed the path by which the survivors had gone.

And so did Asaf Khan to the men of all that party after they were dead; for he knew not who had done the deed, and would that the guilty one should be punished even though they who were less guilty should also suffer. Three were now dead, and but six remained.

Next day, from the hillside he had a pretty shot, two shots, and two of the raiders fell dead. But the others hastily sought cover and no more did Asaf Khan slay that day though he fired half a dozen times. But he despaired not. They had far to go, and he doubted not that he would account for all ere they reached their home.

The following day they left the mountains and entered on a plain, and here Asaf Khan must go cautiously, scanning each bush before he passed it lest behind the bush should lurk a foe. Yet he travelled fast for he knew the men would push on, and this haste was like to have been his undoing.

The sun was already sinking, and Asaf Khan,

for once off his guard, failed to examine with keen glance a bush by the path. He was abreast of it when a man sprang out and aimed a terrific blow, both hands on the hilt of his sword. Now, it is no easy matter to stop a trotting horse in a moment, and on this the man had counted. He stood to the off side of the horse and struck so that the blow should fall on Asaf Khan's leg. Then would his enemy fall from his horse and be at his mercy.

Now, in Asaf Khan's country men ride not, for it is a country of hills, and not till he left Kai did Asaf Khan learn to bestride a horse. From a horse trader did he learn, a man whose party he had joined for a time; and as there were no saddles, he had learned without. When he purchased a steed of his own he purchased a saddle as well, for otherwise men would take him for one of poor estate; but though he soon grew accustomed to the saddle, never could use accustom him to the stirrup, and when he rode alone his feet always swung loose.

It was thus he rode that day, and well for him he rode thus. Dropping his hand on the pommel he leaped backward over the horse's tail, and the blow descended on the side of the horse, disembowelling it and bringing it to the ground. Knife in hand Asaf Khan sprang, and before the man knew his mistake he was dead.

Six were accounted for; but now had Asaf Khan lost his horse, and it would be no easy

matter to overtake the other three should they know what had occurred and travel all night. But this, though Asaf Khan knew it not, was a perilous country to travel over by night; for many ravines ran across the plain and were a man to stumble into one in the dark he would break his neck. Therefore, though the men wondered why their companion came not and at last guessed that Asaf Khan had got the better of him, they dared not go further till daylight came and showed them the way. They camped for the night, two sleeping uneasily while the third watched; but they would not have slept at all had they known that Asaf Khan camped a bare hundred yards away.

The next day Asaf Khan followed on foot. Twice or thrice during the day he saw the men he followed and doubted not that they saw him also, but never did he get a chance for a clear shot. At night he camped. But as he was about to set off next morning he heard the trampling of many horses, and looking back, saw a party of men who rode in his direction. At first he thought they might be other men of this Khan; but another look told him they were traders, and his quick mind formed a plan on the instant.

Throwing up his arms, he waved wildly and ran towards the men. They drew rein and awaited his coming, for though he was one man and they feared him not, he might come to warn them of others who lay in ambush.

Presently Asaf Khan reached the party, and with sure instinct he picked out the leader. Running to this man, Asaf Khan seized his stirrup.

"Justice!" he cried, "Justice on those who rob and murder innocent men!"

"Thy tale?"

Then did Asaf Khan tell how he and three men went this way with silks, and a gang of robbers came upon them secretly. He and his companions slew some of the robbers; but his three companions were slain and he only escaped by fleeing into the bushes where the robbers could not find him. Then did these wicked men take all his goods and depart. After they had left he followed, hoping that by the way he would meet some one who would help him to regain what had been taken from him.

Great was the wrath of the merchants. If robbers were allowed thus to plunder travellers, they would grow in boldness and then would no one be safe. Bidding Asaf Khan mount behind one, they put spurs to their horses and soon overtook the men in front.

At first the men sought to escape; but a few shots sent after them showed them that escape was impossible, and they stood sullenly awaiting the coming of the horsemen.

The merchants formed a ring round the men, and then called on Asaf Khan to say if these were the men who had killed his companions and robbed him.

Asaf Khan leaped to the ground. "These be the men," he said, and ere any could guess his purpose, he drove his knife into the heart of the leader. A twist of the wrist, and the knife was out of one heart and into another. The last man tried to flee from this devil, but fell, Asaf Khan's knife in his back.

"These be the men," said Asaf Khan, "and now have I revenged the death of my three companions."

The merchants looked strangely upon Asaf Khan, for though they were brave men and fought often in defence of their goods, they did not like this killing of men without question. Also, this man had said he and his companions were robbed, but the men he slew had no bundles with them. But the deed was done, and shrugging their shoulders they went their way, though, when Asaf Khan would have followed they sternly bade him go by another way as they were peaceful merchants and liked not such men as he in their company.

Now were all the men whom Asaf Khan followed dead; but not yet was his vengeance complete. The man who had sent these men on their errand still lived.

Asaf Khan smiled as the merchants rode off hurriedly, for he but feigned a wish to go with them; he had not yet made his fire beside the dead men he had slain. He had no horse, but he could not now be far from the village of the Khan and he knew in which direction it lay.

The men had been travelling in a certain direction across the plain, and in that direction would their village lie, for the pursued always makes for home. Also, the merchants went that way, which was another proof, for they would be going to some large village, and this would be the village he sought. Ascending a mound that rose from the plain, from the summit he watched the merchants out of sight. It was good. There was a path, and he could follow the path. If the path branched further on, he would take the path that would lead him in the direction the merchants had gone.

Asaf Khan was of the Tribes, and till he came to man's estate had not ridden a horse, trusting to his good legs to carry him whithersoever he would go. As a Tribesman walks so he walked, with the long pace that carries the walker almost as fast as another man can run, a pace that can be maintained for twelve hours if need be.

Therefore by sunset was he near the village, and as the great gates clanged to he passed within. That this was the village he sought he was sure; but to-night he would rest and to-morrow he would set about the business which had brought him hither. Making his way to the serai, he hired a room and gave a man money to prepare him food. The merchants were not in the serai, for which Asaf Khan was thankful. Later, he learnt that they

had put up that night in the house of a friend and had gone their way next morning.

Of money had now Asaf Khan plenty, and also of jewels a rich store; for on the body of the leader of the band had he found the money and jewels which the band had taken from the house of the Khan they had murdered, and whose dwelling they had plundered and burnt.

That night Asaf Khan slept in the serai, and in the morning he went to the house of the Khan and craved an audience. In the long watches of the night had he thought what he should do, and this was the first step. To take vengeance on a Khan, and that Khan in his own village surrounded by his men was no small matter; but this vengeance Asaf Khan was resolved to take or die in the attempt. Not force or courage would win him this; guile was the weapon he must use if he would succeed, and of guile had Asaf Khan more than most men.

This Khan's house lay within the village, and entering the courtyard, Asaf Khan waited the pleasure of the Khan. In an hour the Khan sent for him, and Asaf Khan was led within, to where the Khan sat with two or three of his friends, talking over the latest news and smoking. The Khan looked up as Asaf Khan entered, and he bade the stranger tell his tale.

But this at first could not Asaf Khan do, so great was the rage that burned in his heart

at the sight of the man who had sent those devils forth. Hardly could he disguise this feeling, and he had to drop his eyes else they had surely betrayed what was in his heart. But he soon overcame this feeling. If the suspicions of the Khan were once aroused, farewell any chance to take vengeance on this man, and the blood of the girl to whom Asaf Khan had in mercy given death still cried aloud for vengeance. He raised his eyes with an effort and addressed the Khan.

"I come as a suitor," he said, "and therefore am I ashamed to speak, ashamed even to look. Yet not as a beggar do I come, for rich will be the reward of the one who will help me regain what I have lost."

At the word "reward" the Khan pricked up his ears, for his was a covetous soul, but he waited in silence for the stranger to proceed. Swarthy of complexion was this Khan, with dark, beetling brows overhanging fierce, black eyes. Tall was he, taller than Asaf Khan, and the breadth of his shoulders was the breadth of two men. Gaunt was his face, and the square jaws stuck out like the jaws of a wild beast. Asaf Khan resumed.

"Know, O Khan, that I am also a Khan; but of land I possess naught for mine enemy hath taken it from me. In the night he came, when I was away hunting the bear on the mountains, and when I would have returned to my home I could not for mine enemy was

there. Many of my men hath he slain, and those who were left are too few to help. But if one came from without with help, then would they join that one and I would regain what I have lost. . . . "

" And thou wilt give ? "

" Much wealth," replied Asaf Khan. He spoke confidently, for he had gauged the man and knew that sooner or later vengeance would be his. " Much wealth will I give now, and four times as much will I give when I have regained my own." He took off his belt and poured out a stream of jewels. " These will I give now, and afterwards will I give four times as much."

One of the companions of the Khan whispered something in the Khan's ear, and the Khan cast a suspicious look at Asaf Khan.

" Dost always take jewels such as these when thou goest to the mountains to hunt bear ? "

" Nay," and Asaf Khan smiled. " These jewels were given me by one who had escaped from the house with them ere the enemy prevailed. They were in his charge and he brought them to me."

Again the friend whispered, and again the Khan questioned Asaf Khan.

" Why promise so much now and so much afterwards ? Give all now and mine aid shall be thine."

Asaf Khan shook his head. " That may not

be, for these are all I have by me. These are the jewels of which the man had charge. The others are hidden in the house where even he knows not. They are the wealth of my house, and only I, the Khan, know their hiding place."

A third time spoke the friend into the ears of the Khan, and a third time the Khan hearkened to him.

"How know we this is the truth? Afterwards, it may be that the rest will not be forthcoming."

Then was Asaf Khan's wrath kindled against the one who whispered in the ear of the Khan. With a swift stride he was beside the man, and seizing him by the ear dragged him roughly to his feet.

"These are not the words of the Khan," he said, "they are the words of this thing I hold by the ear. Let it speak for itself if it hath aught more to say."

Now this man was a coward, as was known to all there save Asaf Khan. Asaf Khan had thought to have the man turn on him, and therefore was his other hand on the hilt of his knife. But there was no need. The man raised clasped hands to the Khan.

"In thy presence is it done," he said. "Because thou art here I may not do what I would to this insolent man who outrages thy servants."

But the Khan took no heed. At first his

face had flushed a dull red ; but though he had listened to this man he despised him, and often had he felt he would like to pull the man by the ear as the stranger now did. Therefore did the anger leave the Khan's face, and he laughed.

"Nay," he said, "think I am not here, and do thou to this insolent stranger as a brave man should do to one who hath so despitefully ill-used him."

Now knew Asaf Khan the man for what he was, and with a sharp twist of the ear he released him.

"Go to thy seat," he said, "and open not thy lips when men talk together. I, Ahmed Khan, am a man, as all know in the parts whence I come, and this thy Khan methinks is also a very man. We men will settle this matter."

Thus did Asaf Khan begin with his tongue to beguile the Khan to his undoing. His name he hid ; for the village lay on the great road and many travellers came that way. Some of these may have heard the name of Asaf Khan in their travels. They might wish to see one who bore this famous name, and might recognise him.

The Khan was pleased with Asaf Khan's speech and bade him speak further ; but this would not Asaf Khan do till the Khan had sent the other men from the room and they two were alone. Then did he open his heart to the Khan, telling him in what way he required

the help of the Khan, how many men would be needed, how many days' journey from this place lay his home, and other matters; for he had prepared his tale overnight, and none listening would have known that no such place as he described existed. And ever with his talk he mingled words in praise of the Khan, but so shrewdly that it seemed not praise, so that the Khan was greatly pleased with this man who came seeking the aid of a great warrior to help him recover what had been wrested from him. But even while the Khan smiled and was pleased with the words of the stranger, he had made up his mind that the reward offered was too small. He would say naught of this matter now, but when he and his men had driven out the enemy he would not take a portion of the jewels that lay hidden in the house, he would take all. Thus while Asaf Khan sought to deceive the Khan, the Khan sought to deceive Asaf Khan.

The Khan pressed the stranger to take up his residence there, but Asaf Khan shook his head. It could not be. When he was driven from his home he had made a vow that till again in his own home he could ask his friends to eat with him, never would he eat in the home of any man, but would eat of the food cooked in serais. The Khan insisted; but Asaf Khan said that Allah had heard the vow, and that if he broke the vow it might be that Allah in his wrath would prevent him regaining what

he had lost. This was true, and the Khan said no more.

Thus dwelt Asaf Khan in the serai of this village, eating there; but all day was he at the house of the Khan and daily the Khan liked him more, putting aside those others who had been his friends and speaking to Asaf Khan alone.

Then were these men wrath, and one night they planned to waylay Asaf Khan as he returned from the house of the Khan. Five men were they, with faces muffled so that he should not know them, and with big sticks in their hands they waited. Knives they would not use, lest the man be slain and the Khan find out who had done this thing and his wrath descend upon them for depriving him of the treasure he would have received for helping this man. Their very lives would not be safe. But a beating was another matter, and a beating they would give this upstart who had gained the friendship of their Khan so that they who had been his friends were now driven from the presence as men of no moment.

Now, Asaf Khan had suspected some such thing; for he had marked the black looks these men cast upon him and knew they would seek to do him an injury, so that it was a man not altogether unprepared who came down the village street that night, with watchful eyes scanning each shadow ere he passed it. Thus Asaf Khan saw the men ere they saw him,

and drawing back, himself stood in the shadow while he thought. He could have gone to the serai by another road, but this he was loth to do, for ever was Asaf Khan averse to being turned from a path he had taken. This was the road by which he would have gone to the serai, and by this road would he go.

Presently one of those who waited stepped forth from the shadow. He looked to see if the stranger came, and Asaf Khan saw the stick in his hand. So this is what they would do. They would beat him with sticks, as a dog is beaten, and shame him in the eyes of the village. Asaf Khan thought fast, and presently returned by the way he had come. He knew a man who lived in this street at the end, and he knocked at the man's door.

The man came forth, and seeing Asaf Khan would have had him enter, but Asaf Khan shook his head, drawing the man aside.

"I would have thine aid," he said. "It is a love matter, and the husband suspects. He knows this robe and this turban," for now that Asaf Khan was a Khan he wore a long bearskin robe over his clothes and his turban was of silk, "and this man watches always at the gate of the serai. Take my robe and turban, therefore, and lend me thine. Then go thou to the serai and the man, seeing thee enter, will think it me. There canst thou throw off the robe and turban and return to thy house."

It was a small matter, and for friendship's

sake the man did as Asaf Khan asked, exchanging robes and turbans with him, and giving Asaf Khan also a thick stick of heavy *kan* wood. Then went the man down the street towards the serai and the men fell upon him. Five men were there, and in a moment was the man beaten to his knees. A few more blows, and he lay prone. The men laughed aloud. Now was this upstart brought low and taught his proper place.

But not long did they rejoice. Even as they laughed there descended a rain of blows upon them, and a fury burst into their midst, a devil that smote and smote and smote, till it even seemed that twenty men with twenty sticks showered blows upon them, blows that fell with a force blows seldom have. First one went down, then another. They turned upon this fury, but a third fell. The other two turned to flee ; but even as they turned a fourth fell, and ere the fifth and last man had taken a dozen paces he too fell.

Asaf Khan laughed, and taking up the man bore him to the serai and tended him till he again came to his senses. Grieved was Asaf Khan for what had occurred. Had he thought the jealous husband intended thus, never would he have exchanged clothes with his friend. The man said naught, but he thought much. The stranger must have known the husband waited, and therefore the exchange of robes and turbans.

At first he felt anger in his heart ; but when the stranger gave him a ring, again bewailing the fate that had thrust upon his friend the punishment that should have been his, the man was appeased and presently went to his home, promising to say naught of this matter. Indeed, he was not likely to speak of it, for what man likes it to be known that he has been well beaten with sticks.

When Asaf Khan went to the house of the Khan next day, he asked after the friends of the Khan, for none did he see there. They were ill, the Khan told him. They had eaten together overnight, and in one of the dishes was something that had disagreed with them. All were in bed and had sent word to say they could not wait on him that day.

Three came to the house of the Khan on the next day, and the other two the day after ; and on that day Asaf Khan drew them aside.

" It is ill work meddling with men," he said. " Beware, lest when ye eat together again it be for the last time."

After that day the men left Asaf Khan to himself ; and though they still hated him in their hearts, outwardly they treated him with great friendship. How he had bested them that night they could not guess, nor who had beaten them. The stranger lay at their feet insensible, and lo ! a fury had descended upon them and beaten them insensible in turn. When they again recovered their senses the

stranger they had beaten was gone, and next day he was at the house of the Khan with never an ache or pain, while for many days their bones ached with the blows they had received.

But from this day they tried not to come between Asaf Khan and the Khan, always drawing aside when the two spoke together, and this is what Asaf Khan desired.

Seven days lived Asaf Khan thus in the village of the Khan, and ever the Khan's liking for him increased. And now Asaf Khan would go out hawking. Hawking, he said, was the sport of princes and Khans, and they went forth each day with hawk and hound and scoured the country for game.

This Asaf Khan did for he saw that within the village he could do naught against the Khan. Always sat the Khan within his own house, his men around him, and never went he forth after the sun set. Had Asaf Khan been in the house of the Khan, he might have taken vengeance some night ; but to live in the house he must eat with the Khan, and never would he eat salt with this man. Therefore the tale of the vow.

Outside it would be otherwise. Some day, when the Khan's men were absent from his side, Asaf Khan would draw his sword and call upon the Khan to defend himself. Then would he slay this devil and escape on his swift steed ere the men knew what had occurred.

But this was not to be. Ten times they

went forth, and always some of the Khan's men stayed near the Khan. How then could he fight with the Khan, seeing that the men would fall upon him from behind? Something he must do soon, for the Khan waxed impatient for the jewels and would be gone with his men to the home of the stranger. Asaf Khan restrained him for some time; for, said he, let the man who had dispossessed him think himself secure. Then would he be off his guard and might be taken by surprise.

But not always would this tale answer, and Asaf Khan must do something speedily. Also had the Khan six days before sent forth men to seek those whom he had sent to the house of his enemy. These men would hear of a stranger who had dwelt in the house of the dead Khan, and might recognise him from the description.

And then one day Asaf Khan saw a man whom he knew and who knew him. The man saw not Asaf Khan, but Asaf Khan saw him and knew him for a man of the village at which he had last stayed. What did the man here, in the village of the man who had slain his Khan? The man must be a traitor, and should he see Asaf Khan, would betray him.

What he had to do must be done at once, and he asked the Khan to go hawking again on the morrow. The Khan was nothing loth, for he was a good rider and loved a gallop.

And early on the following morning they set forth.

Asaf Khan studied the horses of the men. They were ordinary country breds, and though they had great staying powers were not swift. His own steed, for which he had paid a high price, had Arab and Yarkandi blood, and therefore with great staying power it also had great speed. And both pace and staying power would be needed in the steed he bestrode this day.

From the village they rode, and this day they went afar ; for near the village had the game become shy and Asaf Khan said that he had heard from a man that game was more plentiful further afield. On they rode, taking no heed to the game that rose, till at last they were a good seven miles from the village and then the sport began.

The hounds were unleashed and began to hunt the undergrowth for hare ; the hawks were unhooded and the coverts beaten for partridges and grouse. Many a hare did the hounds run to death, and many a partridge and grouse fell beneath the talons of the falcons. Always did Asaf Khan seek to draw the Khan apart, but always were men near. The day was passing and soon it would be too late. Asaf Khan could not call on the Khan to fight as he had wished, but vengeance he must take. Riding up to the Khan, he pointed over the Khan's shoulder.

"Let us go there," he said; and as the Khan turned to look, Asaf Khan plunged his knife into the Khan's back. "The vengeance of Asaf Khan!" he yelled, and put spurs to his horse.

Long was the chase, but never did the men overtake Asaf Khan. Till dark they chased him, first by sight and then by the print of his horse's hoofs. Again next day they followed. But one who follows the hoofprints of a horse cannot travel as does the one who rides the horse which makes those prints, and they returned to the village where their dead Khan lay waiting burial.

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